

Dunbar's Numbers and Labor Organizing

Dunbar's number is the cognitive limit to the number of people with whom an individual can maintain stable personal relationships, generally cited as **approximately 150 people**.

Challenges of Growth Beyond 150

Once a group surpasses **150 members**, the reliance on informal bonds and peer pressure to maintain cohesion begins to fail, leading to:

- **Loss of Solidarity:** The sense of common purpose weakens as members can no longer know everyone personally, making it harder to build deep **trust and kinship** required for collective action.
- **Weakened Communication:** Communication shifts from fluid and informal to more **structured and formalized**, which reduces face-to-face interaction between general members and leadership.
- **Need for Formal Structure:** A more formal, hierarchical management structure becomes necessary to maintain organization.

Strategic Organizing Based on Dunbar's Numbers

Labor organizers can structure their efforts by creating dense, interconnected networks of smaller groups, using the full scale of Dunbar's numbers as a blueprint:

Group Size	Relationship Layer	Organizing Role / Application
5	Core Group (Most intimate, trusted circle)	Core leaders or the " inside organizing committee ."
15	Good Friends/Support Group (Close friends who can be relied on)	Smaller, self-contained teams of activists, empowered to delegate authority and make decisions.

50	Casual Friends/Local Community (Principal social circle)	Basis for smaller union chapters or work groups; focus on fostering strong bonds through social activities.
150	Personal Social Group (Maximum for stable personal relationships)	The size for semi-independent units or "chapters" to help maintain a sense of community in large workplaces.

Exponential Growth Implication

The need to build "subcommunities" and delegate authority within these layered groups is key to managing **exponential growth**. Instead of a single leader managing a growing mass of people, the organizational structure *grows with the membership* by replicating the smaller, functional groups, ensuring solidarity and effective communication scales.

Dunbar's number suggests that humans can only maintain stable relationships with approximately 150 people, which can have significant implications for labor organizing. While the theory's empirical basis has faced some challenges, it remains a useful framework for understanding the social dynamics of groups and can inform organizational strategies for unions.

The breakdown of informal bonds

According to the theory, once a group surpasses 150 members, the reliance on peer pressure and personal relationships to maintain cohesion begins to fail. In larger groups, a more formal, hierarchical management structure becomes necessary. For labor unions, this can mean:

- **A loss of solidarity:** As the number of members grows beyond what individuals can know personally, the sense of common purpose and kinship weakens. This

can make it harder to build the kind of deep trust and solidarity required for effective collective action.

- **Weakened communication:** When groups are small, communication can be fluid and informal. In large groups, communication must be more structured and formalized, which can reduce direct, face-to-face interaction between members and leadership.

Strategic organizing based on Dunbar's numbers

To address these social limitations, organizers can use Dunbar's theory to structure their efforts effectively. The full scale of Dunbar's "numbers" includes several layers of relationships, which can be adapted to union structures:

- **Core groups (5 people):** The most intimate, trusted circle. In organizing, these are the core leaders or the "inside organizing committee."
- **Good friends/support group (15 people):** A larger circle of close friends who can be relied on for help. This group can be used to form smaller, self-contained teams of activists who work together frequently.
- **Casual friends/local community (50 people):** The principal social circle. This can be the basis for smaller union chapters or work groups based on department or shared tasks.
- **Personal social group (150 people):** The maximum number for stable personal relationships. Many organizations find that creating semi-independent units of this size helps maintain a sense of community.

Building smaller, connected subgroups

Applying these concepts, labor organizers can focus on building dense, interconnected networks of smaller groups rather than managing one large, unwieldy mass. This can be done by:

- **Delegating authority:** Empowering the 15-person "good friends" groups to make decisions and coordinate action among themselves. This reduces the burden on central leadership and builds a more resilient, distributed network.
- **Fostering strong bonds:** Encourage activities that build deep trust and kinship within the 50-person groups. Social activities like eating together can be highly effective in fostering feelings of belonging and collaboration.
- **Creating "subcommunities":** In very large workplaces, the union can be structured as a collection of smaller units or "chapters" based on location or department. As one leader observed of a large digital agency, groups can be "splintered... when they become unwieldy," creating effective subcommunities.