

INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZING CONVERSATIONS

Prepared by the New Orleans DSA Political Education Committee

YOU ARE THE ORGANIZER

General Points

With training, practice, commitment, and patience, anyone can learn to be an effective organizer in the workplace, in the community, or in support of a political campaign.

Although a lot of organizers “talk” at people, few actually listen to them. A good organizing conversation should be 70% listening and 30% talking.

Successful organizing relies on building real relationships with people. Integrity, mutual accountability, and face-to-face interactions are basic preconditions for any functional human relationship.

Your Personal Narrative

Developing a personal narrative based on your lived experiences [as a worker, a member of the community, a socialist, etc.] is key to your ability to connect with other people around shared interests.

Your personal narrative can be tailored to different campaigns. For example, if you’re canvassing for Medicare for All, you could talk specifically about your personal experiences with the healthcare system that most people can relate to.

Your personal narrative should answer these basic questions as concretely as possible:

- 1) Why are you out here talking to me?
- 2) Why are you fighting for [x, y, z]?

The Socialist as Organizer

Additionally, you may want to develop a succinct personal narrative that explains how you became a socialist, what socialism means to you, etc. Doing so will be an effective way of defusing negative reactions and clarifying misconceptions that may arise around the word “socialism.”

While we should be proud and open about our politics, the ideological aspect isn’t particularly relevant to either your personal narrative or the initial conversations you’ll be having with people. It’s best to keep the discussion as concrete as possible, focusing on the particular struggle at hand.

MECHANICS OF AN EFFECTIVE ORGANIZING CONVERSATION

Introduction

State your name and organizational affiliation. Introduce yourself in a way that connects you with the person—e.g. neighbor, coworker, etc. In other words tell people who you’re with and why you’re out talking to them. Be confident and make eye contact.

Open-ended questions

An open-ended question is a question that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, but that requires people to open up about their experiences and issues. On the other hand, a closed question is a question that shuts the conversation down.

Questions can be specifically oriented to the context, but it’s often worth keeping it loose enough to discover unforeseen issues people may have. These issues are often hyper-local and can only become known by talking to people.

Examples of open-ended questions:

- How does [x, y, z] impact your life?
- How do you feel about development in your neighborhood?
- What’s your experience been like with your insurance provider?
- What’s your experience been with the NOPD?
- How would it impact your [family, children, grandchildren, etc.] if you got [a raise, paid vacation, affordable healthcare, cheaper rent, etc.]?
- What happens if we don’t stand up and fight?
- If you could change one thing about your [workplace, neighborhood, city, etc], what would it be?

Agitation

Drawing from the conversation generated by open-ended questions, fire the person up about the injustices of [the state of affairs].

Example agitation questions:

- Is [this state of affairs] [fair, right, just]?
- Do you think the [boss, mayor, wealthy people] has to deal with [this state of affairs]?
- The CEO of Sodexo makes 50 times what you make per week. Do you think they work 50 times harder than you? Is that right?



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Democratic Socialists of America

- Do you think the CEO of Sodexo has to worry about being able to afford their children's medical bills?
- Do you think they have to deal with potholes like this in more affluent areas? Why does the city fix their potholes but not ours?

Calling the Question

Once the person has been agitated, it's time to ask if they're ready to do something about it. You're trying to convince the person to take the next step toward action.

Examples of calling the question:

- Are you ready to stand with your coworkers to fight for better wages?
- Are you ready to stand with your neighbors to go to City Hall and fight to get your streets fixed?
- Are you ready to stand with millions of uninsured and under-insured working Louisianans to fight for Medicare for All?

If people say no when you call the question, go back and remind them of their issues and why they're important.

Inoculation

The purpose of inoculation is to get the person to anticipate and defuse arguments and excuses for not taking action. Inevitably the person will encounter these from the opposition or from coworkers or neighbors who say they're wasting their time or that their efforts are futile. Basically, inoculation is about acknowledging the haters, and preparing the person for what the haters might say or do.

Examples of inoculation:

- Some people are going to say that we can't win this fight, but [here are some examples of successful campaigns].
- The development company says that if they don't gentrify our neighborhood, we'll lose all our jobs and the local economy will collapse. [Explain the arguments of the opposition and why those arguments are false.]
- The politicians and pharmaceutical companies say we simply can't afford to give everyone health insurance.
- What do you think your boss is going to do when they hear that you're organizing a union?

Remind the person that the opposition may take negative and/or positive measures to dissuade them from organizing. Negative measures include disciplinary actions and termination, positive measures include

bribes such as guaranteeing raises to certain workers or giving everybody an extra shift drink.

Helping the person understand their legal rights, the direct actions that can be taken among organizers, and the ulterior motives of the opposition will prepare them to deal with positive and negative measures.

Leadership Identification

It's important to understand the informal interpersonal landscape of a community or workplace, and identify organic leaders who can make or break struggles and campaigns. Therefore you want to ask the person who they respect in the workplace or community, and how to get in touch with that person. You can also ask about gathering spots like parks or bars where you might be able to have more conversations.

Examples of leadership identification:

- Who do you trust [in the neighborhood, at work]?
- Who do you go to when you have a question or a problem?
- Where do people congregate [after work, in the community]?
- Who watches peoples' kids for them when they go to work?

FOLLOWING UP

At the end of a successful organizing conversation, you want to get the person to become active in the campaign in some way. Try to plug the person into concrete activity by asking the person to perform a simple, easily achievable task. For example, ask the person to talk to some of their neighbors and report back to you. It's best to be as detailed as possible in making follow-up plans.