

# THE TEN RULES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

- 1. Nobody's going to come to the meeting unless they've got a reason to come to the meeting.*
- 2. Nobody's going to come to a meeting unless they know about it.*
- 3. If an organization doesn't grow, it will die.*
- 4. Anyone can be a leader.*
- 5. The most important victory is the group itself.*
- 6. Sometimes winning is losing.*
- 7. Sometimes winning is winning.*
- 8. If you're not fighting for what you want, you don't want enough.*
- 9. Celebrate!*
- 10. Have fun!*

**The first rule: Nobody's going to come to the meeting unless they've got a reason to come to the meeting.** Like many of my ten 'rules', this seems self-evident. All of them, however, represent lessons that I have learned over twenty years of making the same mistakes, taking the same basics for granted, and paying the price over and over again, until the lesson is finally learned. I have observed this rule being broken by groups all across the country, groups with experience, groups with talented staff and leaders, who know better, or should. Giving folks a REASON to attend means two things. First, interpreting the issue as related to them. This means developing a 'line' or a 'rap' that sells the issue simply and personally. Even if the issue has been thought through, if the story can't be told simply and quickly in an exciting way, the people are less likely to respond. The organizer has to be able to answer the question 'what's in it for me?' We must GIVE people the reason - this should have been thought through in the planning stage, but in the actual implementation of a campaign, there must be considerable attention to how it's going to be communicated. For example, if the issue is the need for better equipment at the local park, there should be more than one approach, going beyond the obvious. Kids who might use the park will be attracted because the new equipment might be fun. How to sell the issue to their parents? What about neighbors who don't have kids? People who live too far away to benefit directly? A planning group usually grapples with this problem when they're putting together the flyer and the phone call 'rap' sheet - or they should. In this case, a phone rap might look like this:

Call Sheet - Parks Meeting - call in results to : Joe Schmoe, 123-4567 by Wednesday at 7 pm.

"Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm calling for the MidRiver Neighborhood

Organization. Do you have children in school?"

IF YES: We're having a meeting about the playground tomorrow night over at the school at 7:30. Have your children ever been injured on the broken equipment? (LISTEN) Have they ever been cut or hurt on the asphalt? (LISTEN) Would you like to have a safe, well equipped facility to send them to? Well, this is what we're working for. We have the head of Parks for the City coming, and we want to show him just how many people want action. Will you be able to come to the meeting?

IF NO: Have you ever been bothered by the kids hanging out on the corners or playing on the street? (LISTEN) Does it bother you that the parks on the other side of the river have brand new equipment, and kids here in MidRiver have to play in the glass and asphalt, on broken swings? Did you know they just spent \$28,000 to put grass in the park on River Road, and it's been 14 years since they spent a dime on our park? We're having a meeting about the playground tomorrow night over at the school at 7:30. We have the head of Parks for the City coming, and we want to show him just how many people want action. Will you be able to come to the meeting?

Names & Numbers----- Yes -----No -----Ride

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

These two 'raps' seek to interpret the problem in terms of the self interest of the person you're talking to, and thus to get their interest aroused enough to come out.

The second aspect of a REASON to come to the meeting is what happens at the meeting. If the people in the audience are there just to cover a chair, and they are not asked to participate, or there's no chance to ask questions or tell their story, they will find it easier and easier to drop out. The agenda for the meeting should always include a time for individual stories to be told, to put a human face on the problem. Mrs. Schultz should be lined up in advance to come to the mike and tell about poor little Otto who went to the hospital for stitches after he fell off the broken swing. The chair should ask if anybody else has had kids hurt, and ask them to stand, or raise their hand, or even come to the mike. The agenda should include parts for lots of people - not just one chair who speaks and leads and asks the questions of the city folks or the other targets, but plenty of folks trooping up to do their pre-assigned parts -- the more folks who have a part, the more are likely to come out. Even spectators can get the feeling that, next time, they could have an important part in the group, if there are obviously lots of parts being given out. A one-person show, however, tends to stay that way.

**The second rule is: Nobody's going to come unless they know about it.** This is another painfully obvious point. Time after time, though, I have helped groups analyze their shrinking participation, and found that they've ignored this rule. They publicize meetings through the newsletter. The newsletter is distributed door to door by block captains. Half the blocks have no

captains. On the other half, the newsletters were delivered for distribution on Tuesday night after 7, and the meeting was held on Thursday. Even where the conscientious block captains actually went to every house on the block and dropped one off on Wednesday afternoon when they got home from work, about a third of the folks didn't go to the front porch until the next morning, another third read the story about crime on the front page, but missed the meeting notice, and another third thought it MUST be next Thursday they're talking about. Many groups rely on a regular meeting night and a telephone tree to get people out. Others just invite the ones who came to this meeting to come back to the next one.

In fact, there is an almost unbreakable ratio - for every one hundred folks who get a timely, well crafted written notice and a follow-up personal contact by phone or in person, ten will come out. Late notices or wordy, unclear ones cut further into the final count. No personal contact cuts even further. Organizing is hard work, and there are few shortcuts worth taking. A group that doesn't plant seeds with effective outreach should not be surprised when the harvest is sparse.

**The third rule is: if an organization doesn't grow, it will die.** A good outreach effort will bring out new recruits. These folks must be put to work. Somebody has to recognize their effort in coming out, and talk to them, welcome them, give them a chance to get into things. Could they do calls for the next meeting? Would they like to help with posters for the fundraiser? What did they think of the meeting? Each issue should bring in new folks, and there should always be a next issue on the horizon, to get out and touch the community with, to find yet newer folks to get involved with. People naturally fade in and out of involvement as their own life's rhythms dictate - people move, kids take on baseball for the Spring, they get involved with Lamaze classes, whatever. If there are not new people coming in, the shrinkage can be fatal. New issues and continuous outreach are the only protection against this natural process.

**Rule four: anyone can be a leader.** I have had the privilege of working with a wide variety of very talented community leaders in twenty years of community organizing. I can safely and in all humility admit that not one new leader was 'developed' because of my foresight and careful cultivation and training of a new recruit who showed clear promise. Almost without exception, the best leaders have been people who rose to the occasion of a crisis. The priest who spoke at all our news conferences got sick at the last minute. Who can take his place? Mrs. H., you're the only one at home, and the thing starts in five minutes - let me pick you up and brief you in the car. What do you mean, Mr. President, you're not going to run for reelection? This organization is big, it's new, and nobody else is ready! Mr. T., you have to run, or else we'll have those guys from UpThere in charge of the group, and we can't have that, can we? The only wisdom or craft I can claim in any of these scenes is an ability to convince people to step into a tough situation and give it a try, coupled with a shameless willingness to praise and support a person after their first shaky performance. They did the rest. Anybody can be a leader. A good community organization provides a lot of people with a lot of opportunities to practice, to try it out, to learn by doing. A broad team of folks who can lead is built by constantly bringing new people into leadership roles and supporting them in learning from this experience.

**Rule five. The most important victory is the group itself.** This starts a series of rules about winning. Winning is what organizing is about. Winning without building is a hollow process, though. We need to celebrate the simple fact of survival, given the odds most groups face. The

way to ensure that a group is built out of activity on issues is to create a structure that governs the group and bring people who work on issues into the governance of the group. In a mature organization this happens through elections, and the elections should at least bring new people in, even if they are not contests where folks vie for the votes to outdo their 'opponents'. A growing organization should pay close attention to this as well, through steering committees or leadership meetings where folks who are mostly involved in issues get brought into the deliberations on priorities, strategies, structure and the 'business' of the group. Even if they choose to say no, the opportunity to join in setting the course of the group makes it more their own. A group that is governed by one set of folks and involves a whole different set as beneficiaries or volunteers is never going to be a real people's organization. No empowerment ever comes from well meaning outsiders helping the helpless.

**Rule six: Sometimes winning is losing.** Remember in our initial discussion of the process of organizing we talked about the FWFWFLFH method. A group that never loses is probably just too naive or nearsighted to understand what's happening. Part of the political literacy that community organizing ought to impart is the ability to stare the facts in the face and understand that the politician who just talked for twenty minutes didn't really mean that he supports us - he really said he wasn't going to do what we want. Beyond this, we need to be careful that we ask for something we really want. A community organization that I worked with in Providence once undertook a two year campaign to open up membership in the United Way to more minority and non-traditional agencies. One result was that the group itself became a member agency! We thought this was the ultimate victory! No more spaghetti suppers, no more grant writing, no more scratching around for free paper for the mimeo - easy street. When a big Federal grant came down for anti-crime organizing, all other fundraising ground to a halt, everybody got a raise, the group bought a van and moved into a nice office. The dark side soon surfaced, though. The highly motivated but formerly low paid staff started to get resistance from leadership when it came time to challenge the real power brokers downtown - these folks are big in the United Way! We're going to be cutting our own throats! Leaders started to bid for the job openings, which now were much more lucrative - and those who didn't get hired felt that they had been put down unfairly, and stopped volunteering - if their fellow leader was now going to get to take home all that money, well he could make the phone calls! The final straw was the fight over the van. Who gets to drive it home at night -the new director of the anticrime project or the president - the fight was vicious and bitter, and the staff that thought they'd signed on for a crusade left in disgust, and the organization took a two year nosedive, leading to de-funding by the United way and death. This group thought they wanted respectability and acceptance, and were willing to pay any price to get them. In the end, they lost their power and they lost their integrity, and finally they lost their very existence.

**Rule Seven - sometimes winning is winning.** Most community organizations take on little slices of the problems that confront their community. The achievements seem insignificant, and the progress seems so slow! A good organizer knows how to build a sense of power and accomplishment, while not ignoring the problems that still remain to be solved. Every group has a cynic, who says 'okay, we got a million for our loan program. There's still vacant buildings out there we won't be able to fix!' This can lead to discouragement. Nobody can fight day after day without some hope, and acknowledging the victories along the way builds that hope. The East Toledo Community Organization fought for three years to get a new road built to open up the

industrial potential of the area. There were plenty of reasons to complain about what we didn't get - no job guarantees from new industry, no required hiring of neighborhood folks on the road construction. The victory was that we got a ten million dollar road built, though, and we worked very hard to let the whole community - inside East Toledo and outside - know that that's what we wanted, and that's what we got. This rule - know when to stop and claim the win - leads very directly to the ninth, but that's not coming until after the next one.

**Rule Eight - If you're not FIGHTING for what you want, you don't want enough.** We've talked before about the purpose of community organizing - building power. It's a lot like lifting weights. If you stay with the little baby weights, you'll never get the strength to do really heavy work. Community organizers know that it's possible to keep busy doing stuff and still get nowhere. It's possible to define your goals by what's achievable, and look like you're succeeding. The tragedy is that a group that never defines a difficult goal will never achieve a meaningful accomplishment. This extends, in the arena of power, to conflict, which we've talked about before. For now, remember the rule and check up on your group to make sure **SOMEBODY** thinks you're too strong, too forceful, too demanding, too abrasive. That probably means you're getting close to where the real power is.

**Rule Nine - celebrate!** I once ordered a young organizer in a new group to find some excuse and hold a victory party within a week or face firing! This young woman could only see the tough part - the half empty glass. She was starting to infect the neighborhood leadership with this negativity, and the group was sinking fast. Much to her surprise and delight (it saved her job), when she started talking to leaders, they came up with lots of reasons to celebrate! They wrote a **VICTORY** flyer, organized a block party with a cookout and games and awards, and turned the whole spirit of the group around - now they were winners! Everybody wants to be with a winner!

**Finally - rule number ten - have fun!** I started organizing with an all business attitude that looked at a meeting as being over when the gavel fell, and at the hanging out and laughing and drinking coffee afterwards as a distraction and a waste of time. I missed the community part of community organizing. These people were building a community, and sharing their fears, their hopes and their vision of the future over a beer at the club after the action was just as important as the planning meeting. I learned that meals and birthdays and Christmas parties and the summer picnic are organizing too. I learned that the posters that got made in the office with pizza and pop by the gang of volunteers we could scare up on a Friday night were far more important to the organization than the same posters made separately in peoples' homes. I learned that using humor to embarrass a public official brought a feeling of power to our folks that straight, serious conversation about our rights and their responsibilities could never come close to. I learned the power of **FUN!** and I vowed to try to make organizing at least as much fun as TV.

By Dave Beckwith, with Cristina Lopez    Center for Community Change <https://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers97/beckwith.htm#rules>