



ANNE ARUNDEL  
CONNECTING TOGETHER

## Organizing Universals

1. **POWER.** Power is the reason for building any broad-based organization. It is not good or evil; the question is how you get it and what you do with it. If most people want power, they must organize their own people and/or money in order to act consistently and persistently:

"At the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you take and you keep what you can hold. If you cannot take anything, you won't get anything. And if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything without organization."

*–A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, architect of the Poor People's Campaign, and one of the leaders of the 1963 Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C.*

"Power properly understood is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense, power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice. One of the greatest problems in history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

*–The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

2. **SELF-INTEREST.** Have an appreciation of your self-interest, your allies', and your opponents'.
  - a. Self-interest is not selfishness. The Latin roots of self-interest are "inter" (between) and "esse" (to be), meaning "to be between."
  - b. Our self-interest is not only what we want, it is the common good that exists between ourselves and others. A broad-based organization organizes through peoples' varied and multiple interests in an attempt to knit together a wide spectrum of interests. This approach requires a good deal of trust and ongoing negotiations between people who have different interests. Without an understanding of a person's multiple self-interests, organizers and leaders will make numerous mistakes.
  - c. The two drives of self-interest:
    - i. Self-preservation (food, safety, shelter)
    - ii. Drive for recognition and meaning. (e.g.: Placards for the 1968 sanitation worker's strike in Memphis said, "I am a man," rather than calling for better wages, though that certainly was an aim. The point was recognition of their humanity).
3. **COMMITMENT TO RELATIONAL POWER.** This means one-to-one meetings as a primary tool for organizing. A face-to-face meeting between two people for 30-45 minutes is the best way to initiate the beginnings of a relationship and to begin to discern each person's self-interest. Having relationships helps understand why all sides think and act in a certain way. Don't stereotype. Self-interest is not static. Locking people into a certain self-interest closes off organizing opportunities to challenge or negotiate in new ways. Also, there are no permanent allies nor permanent enemies; only permanent interests.

- a. Caucus when faced with a challenge. Relational power is further strengthened when we caucus together to address an issue, rather than attempt to face it alone.
4. **DISTINGUISH BETWEEN A PROBLEM AND AN ISSUE.**
- a. Problem: general, large, and hard to act successfully upon. E.g.: Bad housing in certain neighborhoods.
  - b. Issue: immediate, specific, and something an organization has enough power to legitimately have a chance of winning. E.g.: systematic redlining of a minority community by banks.
    - i. Issues can be polarized and personalized. E.g.: anger can be polarized toward a specific bank and personalized toward the bank's president.
    - ii. If and when an action leads to victory, it is equally important to *depolarize* and *de-personalize*. Opponents today can become tomorrow's allies.
5. **PUBLIC ACTION IS USED TO GET A REACTION.** Alinsky: "the action is in the reaction."
- a. First reaction for an organization is recognition. Without recognition, it cannot negotiate because publicly it does not exist in the eyes of its opponent.
  - b. We often must use tension with people in power to get a reaction. Tension creates uncomfortable feelings that often cause people to react in ways they would not normally do. Tension also makes leaders uncomfortable, and therefore leaders are often reluctant to initiate it. We must remember that in the public arena, respect is more important than being liked.
  - c. Getting an action often means being unpredictable. Use humor, a story, silence, or direct confrontation to get a useful reaction. Repeating the same tactics over and over will not elicit a reaction.
  - d. Evaluate the action and reaction. After each action, organizers and leaders should conduct a 15-20 minute evaluation. This allows people to express their feelings in real time and imagine potential next steps.
    - i. In-depth evaluations a few days later should occur for larger actions.
    - ii. Questions to be asked should be, "did we get the reaction we planned for?" "If not, why not?" "What leaders were developed during this action?"

From:

Graf, Arnie. Lessons Learned: Stories from a Lifetime of Organizing. Chicago: Acta Publications, 2020.