



Basics of Community Organizing

Neighborhood Leadership Institute Workshop

For more information, visit citizensnyc.org
Contact Arif, AUllah@citizensnyc.org | 212-822-9580

**CITIZENS
COMMITTEE
FOR NEW
YORK CITY**

About

Community organizing is the process of bringing together members of a community to work towards common interests. It's as simple as that, and you can do it! Above all, it requires a good amount of determination, perseverance, a clear plan with goals, reliability, follow-through, and a willingness to compromise.



THE FUNDAMENTALS

• Initial Outreach

Talk to neighbors and community residents; ask them about their thoughts on the neighborhood – what they like about it, what could be improved, concerns, etc. Ask them if they would be interested in doing something about the issues with which they're concerned and tell them that you're looking to collaborate with other neighborhood residents to work on projects important to the community.

Make sure to talk to other community leaders; getting their support/involvement will go a long way. Reach out to youth as well, particularly teens and those in their 20s. As you conduct outreach, do more listening than talking.

Remember:

A community organizing campaign/group is not about carrying out one person's vision, but to work together as neighbors to carry out a shared vision, which includes plenty of compromise. Develop a timeline!



• **Form a Core Group**

These are people you have identified in your initial outreach effort who would be interested in getting involved in a community project, including those who are passionate about specific community issues or who are already active in some way.

Organize a meeting with potential core group members at which everyone shares their individual vision for the neighborhood and one issue they would want to work on. Agree on an overall vision for the neighborhood. (What is your ideal neighborhood?)

With your core group, identify tasks to organize a general meeting, primarily more outreach to make sure you have a good turnout. All core members should do outreach. (See section: “How Do We Recruit People?”)

• Identify an Issue

At your first general meeting of community members organized by your core group, identify an issue that everyone agrees on. (See section: “How to Organize and Facilitate a Community Meeting”).

Remember that this first general meeting is a beginning and that you won't be able to cover everything that requires attention. Your main goal for the meeting is to get people interested in joining the effort.


• Develop a Mission

A mission statement is a brief description of your group's fundamental purpose, including identification of your focus community and the geographic location in which you operate. It answers the question, "Why do we exist?" and it should guide your group's actions and decisions. Another way of understanding mission is that it is your final destination, the end result of your group's overall work.

• Identify Goals

Goals support and advance your mission. They describe specific results that your group is working towards. You should have short-term, intermediate-term (optional), and long-term goals.

Additionally, there are external goals and internal goals. External goals are the public-facing goals: the legislation you want passed, the garden you want to create, the building conditions you want to improve. The internal goals are your organizational objectives: the number of new members you want by a specific date.



Be practical about the number of goals you take on at one time. If you are a small or new group, consider focusing on just one or two goals. The short-term goal should serve as a stepping stone for the intermediate goal. The intermediate goal should serve as a stepping stone for the long-term goal. Develop a timeline for the goals. Remember to celebrate when goals are reached!

• Develop a Strategy

A strategy describes how to achieve a goal. For example, if your group's goal is to improve conditions in your building, your strategy could involve meeting with the building owner; speaking with elected representatives; getting media coverage; forming alliances with other tenants' associations; holding a demonstration, etc.

Strategies should be specific to the goals you are pursuing. There's no one size fits all when it comes to strategies.

• Identify Allies

Who will be helpful to and supportive of your organizing efforts? List individuals, groups, institutions, etc. that have influence over the issue on which you're working. Plan out how you are going to gain their support and how you might reciprocate that support for their campaigns.

• **Develop a Work Plan and Timeline**

Working backward from the end of the project or campaign, list each task or step that will be necessary to carry out your goals, including dates for each task. Additionally, identify materials that you'll need to perform the tasks. For example, a microphone for a press conference or speak-out, easel paper and markers for a community forum, a table for outreach, etc. Some materials will require money while others may be donated or borrowed.



PEOPLE POWER

The heart of your organizing effort is people. Involving and retaining people in your organizing initiative are ongoing efforts.

In doing any type of outreach, it is essential that you're able to talk clearly, succinctly, and energetically about the campaign and the issue. Connect the issue to people's lives and be prepared to answer questions. People will not get involved if they can't understand you.

• Tools For Recruiting People

1. Tabling

Set up a small table with literature about the issue and campaign, and talk to people about them. Pick a location with high foot-traffic. (Find out if a permit is required for tabling before doing it).

2. Flyering

Distribute literature about the issue and campaign, and talk to people about them. Don't be aggressive.

3. Promoting

Speak about the campaign at cultural events, religious gatherings, sports events, meetings of other groups, etc. Make sure to get advanced approval for your announcement from the organizers of the events and keep your announcement short.

4. Surveying

Collect the opinions of individuals on a particular issue or range of issues. The survey should be related to your campaign.

Surveys provide an opportunity to open a conversation and possibly engage people in your campaign. The survey should be anonymous (don't ask for names), short (no more than 5 questions – a combination of multiple choice and open-ended), focused, easy to understand, and easy to analyze afterwards, as you'll want to use it to inform your work and/or to develop a report. Surveying can be done while tabling, canvassing, flyering, etc.

5. Canvassing

Knock on people's doors to inform them about the campaign and issue. Don't get upset if people are unresponsive or curt. Remember that you're knocking on their door unsolicited. Keep your pitch short/to the point, and give them a flyer with more info and contact details before moving on to the next door.

• Recruiting People Cont.

6. Social Media

Tools like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, among others, can be effective ways to get the word out about your group's work and generate interest in your campaign or project.

If you decide to use social media, develop goals and strategies for it before simply throwing up a page. Also, one to two group members should be responsible for managing the social media pages, including posting content and responding to messages.

7. Traditional Media

Stories in your local newspapers about the work your group is doing may generate interest among neighborhood residents. Develop relationships with local reporters.



8. Your Personal Networks

Ask current members to invite friends, family, and other people in their networks.

In doing outreach 1 to 5, remember to: go where the people are; always ask for names and contact information (for follow-up), but do not be insistent if people are not willing to offer that information; include contact information for your group in your outreach material; and always have an event (meeting, rally, etc.) that you can invite people to when doing outreach.

• Tools For Holding Onto People

1. Welcome Newcomers

When a new person comes to your group's meeting or event, make them feel welcome right away. An existing group member should greet newcomers, introduce them to other members of your group, and catch them up on the meeting agenda or the purpose of the event. In short, make people feel at home right away and help them find a place in your group where they feel valued. One approach is to say, "Tell us the things you like to do or are interested in doing and we will find a way to plug you in."

2. Stay In Touch With One Another

Regular contact is important. Face to face is best. Short of that, weekly or bi-weekly emails can be effective. In contrast, daily emails or several emails a day to the entire group can make people overwhelmed and disengaged.



3. Act More, Meet Less

Most people dislike meetings. Balance meetings with on-the-ground work for your campaign or project – for example: outreach, educational trainings, community work days, etc.

4. Keep Time Demands Modest

As a grassroots group, everyone is volunteering their time, often on weeknights and weekends. As such, make sure people don't feel overwhelmed. And keep expanding the number of active members to ensure everyone does a little, and no one does too much. Some people will have more time than others, and that's okay. Inevitably, people's availability will shift over time.

5. Do It In Twos

Working in pairs makes performing tasks more enjoyable and increases the likelihood that tasks will get done.

• Holding Onto People Cont.

6. Provide Social Time and Activities

Remember the fundamental reason for your work: to build community. And building community = building relationships. As such schedule a bit of social time at the beginning or end of meetings. It's also a good idea to periodically organize gatherings. For example: potlucks, celebrations, movie screenings, etc. All work and no play drives people away.

7. Provide Skills Trainings

Incentivize participation in your group by giving members opportunities to pick up new skills not necessarily directly connected to your organizing projects; provide skill-building workshops or incorporate an educational component into some of your general meetings through guest speakers. Pairing members with different skillsets on specific tasks will also provide opportunities for learning.

8. Create a Skills-List

People involved in your organizing campaign will have various sets of skills and expertise. Ask them to be open about their strengths and give value to them. Encourage them to take on tasks for which they are best suited; that is also one way to keep people engaged. It feels good to be useful! Of course, people should also feel comfortable to work in areas that they are curious about and in which they would like to acquire skills, preferably with guidance and support from others.

• Holding Onto People Cont.

9. Generate Consensus (when possible)

Consensus is a decision-making process through which groups work towards a decision that, at best, everyone feels comfortable with, or, at minimum, no one is strongly against. Before a decision is made, all opinions are carefully considered, including ones that are different from the majority. Someone with a contrasting opinion can choose to step aside and allow a decision to move forward. The consensus process can be more time-consuming, and your group will need to determine whether it reflects your realities and needs.

The more commonly used decision-making process is majority vote. And for many groups, this process works adequately. Consensus tends to promote greater investment in and commitment to a group, as people feel that they are more valued and their opinions matter more. Some groups use a combination of consensus and majority-vote, depending on the importance of the decision.



Not everyone will agree on every issue. If the disagreement is regarding an issue that is not generally considered critical, be open to letting it go and to staying involved in the campaign. Also remember that all those involved have the same goals and that there is always more than one right way.



Be wary of uncooperative or egotistical individuals. Egos should be discouraged while leadership is encouraged. The two should not be confused. Leadership requires the willingness to work collaboratively and cooperatively, and the ability to encourage and support the work of others.





EVALUATE YOUR CAMPAIGN/PROJECT

To be able to learn from and improve an organizing effort, it is essential to reflect on the progress of the effort. Everyone actively involved in the effort should participate in the evaluation.

• Some Questions to Consider in an Evaluation

1. What are the goals of the effort?
2. What goals have been met or not met, and why?
3. Have goals that have been met improved conditions for the community?
4. What were the expectations of the campaign and have they materialized? Why or why not?
5. Have strategies used for specific goals effectively advanced those goals? What strategies have been most effective and which ones have been ineffective, and why?
6. What additional resources are needed?

• Evaluation Questions Cont.

7. What groups have been most supportive?

8. How have they been supportive? Have we reciprocated support for their efforts, and how?

9. What have been the greatest challenges, and why? How are we addressing those challenges? How can we better address the challenges?

10. Based on responses to the previous questions, how can the organizing effort be more effective?

Etc.





ACTION PLANNING

Consider this a worksheet. Answer the following questions before launching your project (or group).

1. Focus Issue

What is the issue or problem that we want to focus on?

2. Core Group

Who will be in the core group? (The core group must include members of the community most affected by the issue your group is addressing).

3. Mission

What is our ultimate purpose for the project? (For example: To increase the availability of affordable, nutritious food for residents of Southeast Queens).

4. Goals

What are three clear goals for the project?

5. Strategy

What are the methods for achieving each goal?

6. Allies

In addition to the core group, who will be supportive and helpful with the project?

7. Barriers

What are the barriers that we expect to encounter? What are our plans for dealing with them?

8. Work Plan

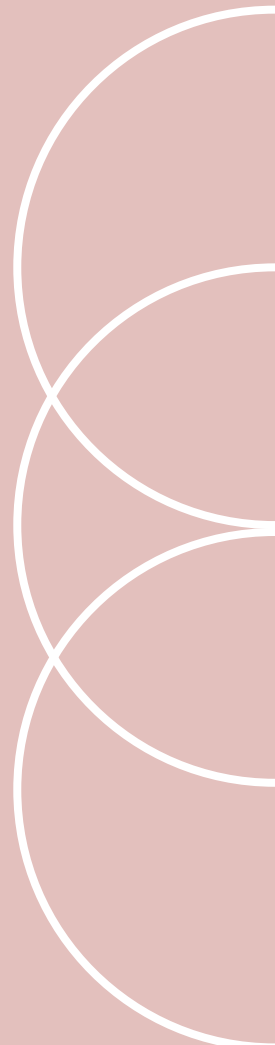
What are concrete, specific tasks for each goal and strategy?

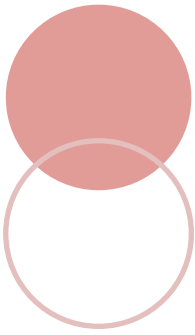
9. Timeline

Attach realistic dates to the work plan. Working backward from completion of the project, what do we want to accomplish by the end of each month?

10. Research (optional)

What are the questions that we need to answer in order to complete the project successfully?



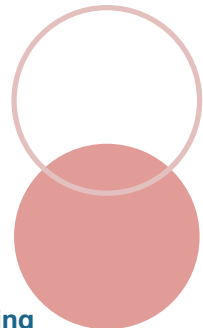


11. Budget

If money is required to carry out the project, what are the items needed and what are their costs?

12. Evaluation

How will we evaluate the project?
How will we know if we were successful or if we are making progress? Besides reaching our major goals, what other outcomes are desirable? How will we raise this money?



ORGANIZE AND FACILITATE A COMMUNITY MEETING

• Organize the Meeting

1. Announce a meeting to discuss the needs in your community. If possible, talk to other community members or leaders and announce the meeting together. Make the announcement to as many members of the community as possible, including youth.

2. Schedule the meeting at a time that would be convenient for many people (e.g., on a weekend or weekday evening). The meeting should have a clear start and end time.

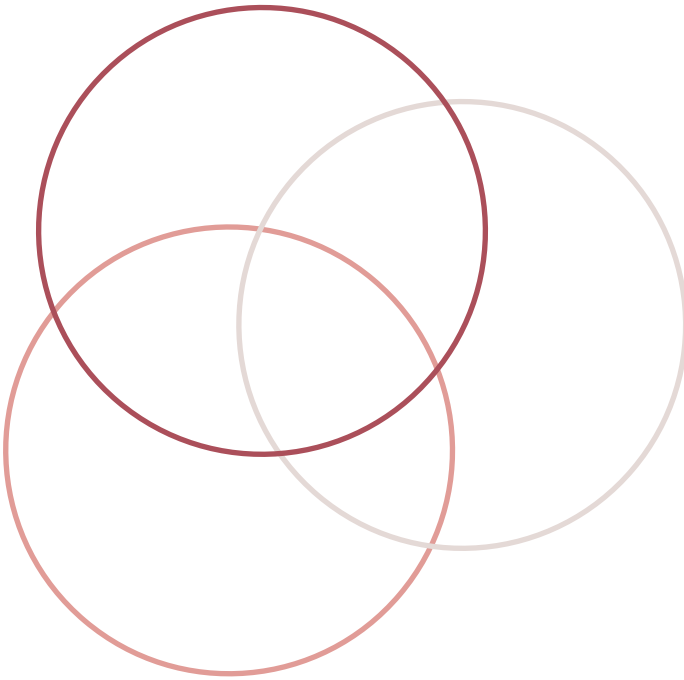


• Organize the Meeting Cont.

3. Identify a space that people can travel to easily and that can accommodate a few more people than you expect to attend.

4. Develop an agenda or a list of items that will be covered at the meeting. Ideally, you should develop this agenda with other core members of your group or campaign.

5. Identify a facilitator (or facilitators) for the meeting. See the section “Facilitate the Meeting”.



6. Identify a note-taker to record at least the main points of the meeting, including decisions, follow-up tasks, and topics requiring further discussion.

7. Circulate an attendance sheet requesting name, email, and telephone number.

• Facilitate the Meeting

The role of the facilitator is essential to a successful meeting. Being a good facilitator takes work and practice. Below are some key ingredients for effective facilitation.

1. Prepare agenda before the meeting. Ideally, send the agenda two or three days in advance to those who will be attending the meeting.

2. At the beginning of the meeting, review and confirm the agenda with participants. An opportunity to suggest additional agenda items should be given. *Additional agenda items should be relevant to the meeting.*

3. List basic ground rules or agreements for the meeting. For example, everyone agrees to: be respectful and not talk over anyone else; share their opinions/thoughts while being mindful of how much they're talking; keep comments relevant to the discussion; not have side conversations; put cellphones on vibrate, etc.

4. If meeting is not too large (30 or fewer people), do brief introductions. Total time for introductions should be no more than 20 minutes. If a participant is speaking for too long, gently interrupt them, citing time and the need to get through the agenda by the specified time.

• Facilitate the Meeting Cont.

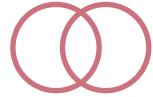
5. Keep focused and stay on schedule, spending the necessary time on each agenda item.



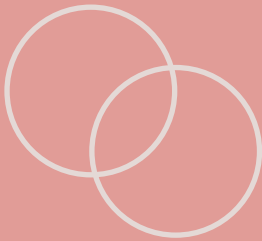
6. Be flexible and open to modifying the agenda if absolutely necessary. For example, if a relevant item not on the agenda leads to a discussion that participants feel is urgent or very important, allow time for it and shorten the time dedicated to other less important agenda items (ideally, with everyone's approval – a quick show of hands).

7. Be aware of the dynamics in the room (e.g., individuals who take up too much space, gender/race dynamics, topics that are triggering, people seeming disengaged, aggressive behavior, etc.), and create a safe and comfortable space where all participants can share their thoughts without feeling threatened.

• Facilitate the Meeting Cont.



8. Quickly address and manage possible conflicts or tense moments. Do not take sides, validate people's opinions, and remind them that everyone at the meeting has the same goal and are on the same team. In particularly tense moments, it may be necessary to pause and take a break. During that time, speak with the individuals who are most connected with the conflict or tension.



9. Make space for those who want to be part of the discussion gently encourage quiet participants to contribute their thoughts. Tactfully interrupt participants who are long-winded or over-participate.

10. Connect ideas, comments, and recommendations, and share those connections with participants.

11. Write down key points on blackboard, chart paper, etc.; ideally, this task should be performed by another person.



• Facilitate the Meeting Cont.

12. Be enthusiastic and energetic, as that influences how engaged participants are.

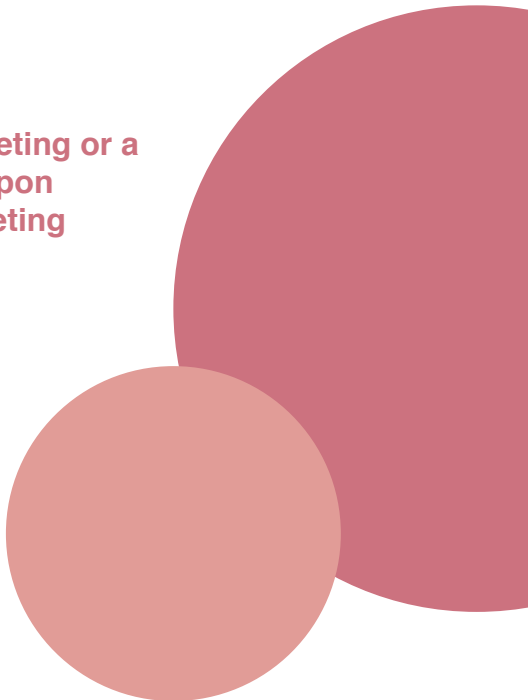
14. Do not abuse facilitator role to talk more than everyone else or to give those with viewpoints similar to yours greater talking time.

13. Remain constantly engaged in the meeting. Make eye contact with all the participants. Do not have side conversations.

15. Ask for commitments to take on tasks and make note of them, specifying clear deadlines agreed upon by meeting participants.

16. At the end of meeting, briefly review key decisions, specifying clear deadlines agreed upon by meeting participants.

17. Schedule the next meeting or a date/time for an agreed-upon action relevant to the meeting agenda.



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING RESOURCES

1. Training for Change

Take your organizing further with a Training for Change training in organizing skills, transformational work, or training for trainers.

www.trainingforchange.org

2. Center for Community Leadership Organizing Academy

The Association of Neighborhood and Housing Development has a 9-month organizing training series to help train and support community leaders and increase the capacity of grassroots organizers.

anhd.org/project/ccl-organizing-academy

3. People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

Anti-racism trainings for individuals and groups to build their analysis of structures of racism, power and privilege.

www.pisab.org

4. NY Peace Institute

The Peace Institute helps to mediate conflicts that arise between people or in groups; they also conduct trainings to teach mediation and reconciliation skills.

nypeace.org

5. Center for Media Justice

An organization known for its work around media justice; their mission is to create media and cultural conditions that strengthen movements for racial justice, economic equity, and human rights.

centerformediajustice.org

6. Midwest Academy Manual

A go-to comprehensive manual for grassroots organizers working for justice put out by Midwest Academy, a well-known national training institute for organizers and activists.

www.midwestacademy.com

7. Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training

GIFT is a resource center and support network for people who raise money for social justice.

www.grassrootsfundraising.org

