

The Diagnostic Toolkit

Before you can build power, you need to understand the terrain. These three tools help you diagnose **why** a particular message, policy, or tactic might fail—so you can redesign it before you waste months of organizing energy.

These aren't academic exercises. They're field instruments. Use them quickly, iterate, and move on.

Tool 1: The Ontological Insecurity Gauge

Purpose: Assess the "identity risk" of a policy, message, or campaign demand.

The Core Question: *Does this ask people to admit their core story is wrong?*

How to Use It (5-minute assessment)

1. **Write down your core policy or campaign demand**
2. **Ask the Material Risk questions:**
 - Will this cost people money, healthcare, status, or safety in the short term?
 - What's the concrete sacrifice or disruption required?
3. **Ask the Identity Risk questions:**
 - Does this require them to admit past beliefs were wrong?
 - Does this threaten their sense of who they are (provider, patriot, self-made person, good parent)?
 - Does this invalidate sacrifices they've already made?
 - Does this position them as complicit in harm they didn't know they were causing?
4. **Use the Gauge table below** to score the Identity Risk as Low, Medium, or High
5. **Follow the "Strategic Response"** from the table

The Gauge

| Identity Risk Level | What It Means | Your Strategic Response |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Low | Reinforces existing identity or is identity-neutral | Lead with this. Build momentum. |
| Medium | Asks for growth but honors past self ("You were doing your best with what you knew") | Frame as evolution, not repudiation. Provide transition support. |
| High | Requires admission of fundamental error or complicity | Either redesign the message, or only deploy after you've built massive trust and container. |

Examples

Low Identity Risk:

- "Protect Social Security" (reinforces identity as prudent, responsible)
- "Support our veterans" (honors existing values)
- "Lower prescription drug costs" (doesn't threaten self-concept)

Medium Identity Risk:

- "Your insurance company is scamming you, but you didn't know" (admits being fooled, but offers dignified exit)
- "The factory isn't coming back, but here's dignified work in the new economy" (requires letting go, but offers replacement)

High Identity Risk:

- "Your entire concept of meritocracy is a lie designed to keep you compliant" (ego death)
- "The American Dream was built on stolen land and stolen labor" (foundational story collapse)
- "Bootstraps are a myth; you needed help all along and didn't earn what you have" (identity annihilation)

Field Application

Before launching any campaign:

1. Run your core message through this gauge
 2. If it's High Identity Risk, ask: "Can we redesign this to achieve the same outcome with Medium or Low risk?"
 3. If you can't redesign it, ask: "Do we have enough trust, container, and wins already under our belt to hold people through this?"
 4. If the answer is no, **pick a different fight first**
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Tool 2: The Spiral Dynamics Field Decoder

Purpose: Identify which developmental stage (value system) dominates in your target audience, so you can speak their language.

The Core Question: *What does this community believe makes life meaningful and good?*

The Stages (Simplified for Field Use)

| Stage | Core Values | Trigger Words (Positive) | Trigger Words (Negative) | % of US Electorate |
|--------|--|--|---|--------------------|
| Red | Power, dominance, immediate gratification, tribal loyalty | Strength, warrior, win, fight, respect, alpha | Weak, soft, loser, rules, bureaucracy | ~10-15% |
| Blue | Order, tradition, duty, moral clarity, earned authority, sacrifice for the group | Honor, duty, patriotism, family, tradition, God, law | Chaos, selfishness, disrespect, godless, disorder | ~30-35% |
| Orange | Achievement, innovation, individual success, pragmatism, meritocracy | Success, freedom, opportunity, smart, efficient, results | Lazy, failure, incompetent, inefficient, idealistic | ~30-35% |
| Green | Equality, empathy, systemic justice, community care, sustainability | Justice, community, care, inclusion, earth, systemic | Oppression, privilege, exploitation, hierarchy | ~10-15% |
| | Integrative, systems thinking, sees value in | Integration, adaptive, whole- | (Rare; mostly) | |

| | | | | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Yellow | all stages, pragmatic complexity | systems, pragmatic evolution | rejects binary framing) | ~2-5% |
|---------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|

How to Use It (4-step process)

- 1. LISTEN:** Spend time in the community. What do people actually talk about at diners, bars, church, union halls? What stories do they tell about "the good old days"? What makes them angry?
- 2. IDENTIFY:** Match what you hear to the Core Values in the table below. What's the dominant stage? (Blue, Orange, or Green?)
- 3. FRAME:** Use the "Trigger Words (Positive)" for that stage when you talk about your policy. Avoid words from "Trigger Words (Negative)" for their stage.
- 4. CHECK:** Are you using words 2+ stages ahead of where they are? If yes, they won't understand you. Step back.

Code-switch your message: Same policy, different languages:

Policy Example: Universal Healthcare

| Blue Frame | Orange Frame | Green Frame |
|---|---|--|
| "Every American who serves their country through work deserves the dignity of healthcare—it's our duty to care for our own" | "We're the only developed nation bleeding billions to insurance middlemen. Single-payer is the efficient, competitive solution" | "Healthcare is a human right. No one should die because they're poor. This is about justice and collective care" |

Step 4: Don't Skip Stages

You cannot pull someone from Blue directly to Green. The developmental gap is too wide. You *can* honor Blue while inviting them toward Orange, or honor Orange while showing the limits of pure individualism.

Crucially: Most progressive messaging is Green talking to Green. It assumes the audience already sees systemic oppression and wants collective solutions. When you're organizing in Blue/Orange territory, **lead with their values and show how your policy serves those values.**

Tool 3: The Institutional Trust Audit

Purpose: Understand whether your audience trusts institutions to be reformed, or believes they need to be dismantled.

The Core Question: *Do they want to repair the system, or burn it down?*

The Spectrum

| High Trust | Medium Trust (Frustrated) | Low Trust (Anti-Institutional) |
|--|--|---|
| "Government is basically sound; we just need better people running it" | "The system is corrupted by money and incompetence, but it can be fixed from within" | "The entire system is rigged, illegitimate, and actively hostile to people like me" |
| Seeks: Competence, efficiency, ethical leadership | Seeks: Reform, accountability, reduced corruption | Seeks: Disruption, demolition, complete overhaul |

Votes for: Biden, establishment Dems, traditional GOP

Votes for: Sanders, Warren, populist outsiders

Votes for: Trump, protest candidates, or doesn't vote

How to Use It

Ask these 10 questions in conversation (casually, not as a survey):

1. "Do you think Congress basically tries to do the right thing?"
2. "Do you trust the courts to be fair?"
3. "Do you think elections are generally honest?"
4. "Would you want your kid to work in government?"
5. "When you hear 'expert,' do you think 'knowledgeable' or 'out of touch'?"
6. "Do you think the FBI/CIA work for the American people?"
7. "Can government solve big problems, or does it just make things worse?"
8. "Do you believe the news tells you the truth most of the time?"
9. "Is the economy rigged for the rich, or do people generally get what they earn?"
10. "If you had to choose: fix the system or start over?"

Scoring:

- **7-10 "yes" or "fix it" answers:** High Trust
- **4-6:** Medium Trust (Frustrated)
- **0-3:** Low Trust (Anti-Institutional)

Strategic Implications

High Trust Audience:

- **Do:** Propose incremental reforms, "good governance," professionalizing bureaucracy
- **Don't:** Propose revolutionary change; they'll see you as reckless

Medium Trust Audience:

- **Do:** Propose systemic reforms with clear mechanisms (e.g., "ban corporate lobbying," "independent redistricting commissions")
- **Don't:** Ask them to trust government with *more* power before you've proven it can be reformed

Low Trust Audience:

- **Do:** Propose decentralized, community-controlled alternatives (co-ops, mutual aid, local power)
- **Don't:** Ask them to empower the very institutions they believe are trying to destroy them

The Progressive Dilemma

Most progressive policy requires **expanding government power** (single-payer, federal jobs guarantee, Green New Deal). But the people who most need those policies are often in the Low Trust camp.

The only way out of this bind:

1. **Win local** first (city, county, state-level programs that work)
2. **Prove competence** (deliver material goods, don't just talk about values)
3. **Build parallel institutions** (unions, co-ops, community land trusts) that provide security *outside* of government, creating breathing room to trust government again

You cannot skip this sequence. Asking Low Trust voters to hand sweeping new powers to a government they believe is corrupt and hostile is political suicide.

Putting the Three Tools Together

Example: Organizing in a Rust Belt Town

Step 1: Ontological Insecurity Gauge

- High identity risk: "Your factory job isn't coming back; capitalism failed you"
- Medium identity risk: "Your skills are valuable; here's dignified work in the new resilience economy"

Step 2: Spiral Dynamics Decoder

- Dominant stage: Blue/Orange mix (tradition + self-reliance)
- Language: Duty, opportunity, self-sufficiency, protecting the community

Step 3: Institutional Trust Audit

- Result: Low Trust (government let the factory leave, bailed out Wall Street, ignored them)
- Implication: Don't lead with "a new federal program." Lead with "we're building it ourselves—local owned, community controlled"

Your Message: *"We're building a community-owned solar co-op that will cut your electric bill by 40% and create 50 local jobs. No corporate middlemen. No waiting for Washington. We take care of our own."*

Blue (duty, community), Orange (self-reliance, efficiency), and Low Trust (local control, no government dependency) all satisfied.

The Transformation

Here's what the diagnostic process actually changes:

| | Before Diagnosis (Green Framing) | After Diagnosis (Blue/Orange + Low Trust Framing) |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| The Message | "We need a just transition to a green economy to fight climate injustice and create systemic change" | "We're building a community-owned solar co-op that will cut your electric bill by 40% and create 50 local jobs. No corporate middlemen. No waiting for Washington. We take care of our own" |
| Why It Fails/Works | Uses Green trigger words ("just transition," "climate injustice," "systemic") that alienate Blue/Orange. Assumes High Trust in government-led solutions | Uses Blue words ("community," "take care of our own"), Orange words ("efficiency," "cut bills," "jobs," "no middlemen"), and respects Low Trust ("local owned," "no Washington") |

Your 10-Minute Campaign Diagnostic

Stuck? Overwhelmed? Use this quick checklist.

1. **IDENTITY RISK:** Does our main ask feel like an attack on who people are? (Yes/No)
2. **VALUES MATCH:** Are we speaking the language of our audience's core values (see Spiral table above)? (Yes/No)
3. **TRUST LEVEL:** Does our solution match our audience's trust in institutions? (High/Medium/Low)

If you answered "No" to #2, or if #1 is "Yes" and #3 is "Low," STOP.

Your campaign is likely to fail. Go back and use the full tools above to redesign your approach.

Facilitator's Guide

Time: 45-60 minutes for a group to practice all three tools

Materials: Printed worksheets for each tool, whiteboards or large paper

Exercise:

1. **(15 min)** Pick a real campaign or message your group is working on. Run it through the Ontological Insecurity Gauge. Is it Low, Medium, or High identity risk? Can you redesign it?
2. **(15 min)** Discuss: What's the dominant Spiral stage in your community? What language would resonate? What language would alienate?
3. **(15 min)** Do the Trust Audit on your own community. Be honest. Where does trust sit? What does that mean for your strategy?
4. **(15 min)** Synthesize: How would you reframe your campaign using all three tools?

Discussion Questions:

- Which tool was hardest to use? Why?
- Did any tool reveal something surprising about your audience?
- What would you change about your current messaging based on this?

Next: Now that you can diagnose the terrain, we need to address the giant missing piece in progressive organizing: healthy Red energy. Turn to Section 5.