

Management, Organizing, Mobilizing

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Management is art of getting people who work for you to accomplish things. It's a subtle and fascinating art, the applied version of my great intellectual love, sociology. It's usually practiced badly, but even when done badly it can accomplish incredible things. One person can only do so much on their own—their time, their powers, their creativity are all limited. But even an incompetent manager, who uses only a fraction of the powers of her employees, is capable of accomplishing tasks far beyond the range of any single person.

Organizing is the art of getting people who don't work for you to accomplish things. Many of the underlying concepts are the same but the execution is vastly more difficult. You don't really get to pick your people. The people you get don't simply follow instructions, they must be persuaded and cajoled and made to understand your vision. But when it works, they accomplish great things you never would have allowed them to try.

Organizing has many forms. The obvious one is where you take a batch of volunteers and try to shape them into a manageable force. The best are selected, developed, promoted, and taught to do the same. It is like traditional management in reverse: instead of starting with the top of a hierarchy and building down through hiring, you start with a bunch of people at the bottom and try to build them up through training and promotion.

But organizing also means finding other leaders, people embedded in management structures (organizations) of their own, and using them toward a common goal. Sometimes this means explicit direction of their efforts, as in a coalition, where you get the heads of various groups to all work on a common project, or sometimes it's simply having them lend their name or knowledge to the cause. A great organizer of this sort develops rich networks they can quickly call upon in need. (Journalists can be good organizers in this sense, developing connections with sources and experts they can leverage to create a story.)

Organizing is most prevalent in my own field of politics, where the work I tend to do is often called "online organizing." This term usually means the kind of stuff you see on the MoveOn mailing list: emails asking you to call your senator, host a house party, attend a vigil — but mostly tell your friends and give us money. Since I got into this business, cranky old-timers have been yelling at me that organizing people over the Internet is impossible, that you have to organize people face-to-face. This struck me as a ridiculous claim (and still does), but I think I now see the truth these critics are reacting to.

Online organizing is a huge misnomer. Sending emails to millions isn't organizing, any more than writing company wide memos is managing. It does not teach people new skills or persuade them of a larger vision or get them to continue the work themselves. It takes people where they are and gives them small things they can do from there.

Mobilizing can be done thru any medium. The folks who knock on your door to ask for your vote (or donation) are face-to-face mobilizers. You can do the same by telephone or television (call now to contribute!). It is, however, a one-way relationship. You are simply a number on a list.

But this doesn't mean online organizing is impossible, just that it isn't often done. Obviously it's much harder than mere mobilization—and much more complicated—but it's much more rewarding as well. It is what makes for a successful open source project, or a thriving online community. The problem is one of scale — and that's true when it's done through any medium. IAF and ACORN never had five million members. Still, this seems to be the genuinely important question: whether the scaling power of the Internet allows for a revolution in the scale of real organizing. I don't know, but the first step toward answering it is being clear about what it means.