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When I got my first job in digital content creation, I thought of myself as a writer. And a researcher, by necessity. After all, I couldn't effectively communicate *what* I needed to say without first understanding *why* our organization's audience would be interested in reading it.

My colleagues told me I was an organizer (and our audience was our member community). It felt a bit disingenuous at first, like I was play-acting at something everyone could see was outside my scope of expertise. But, I was eager to learn the rules of the road – and I assumed practice would make perfect.

Some of the specific tactical tools I picked up did organically shift my perspective in a way that made me more suited to organizing. For example, I had to learn to think and write in terms of the collective "we," and strictly avoid differentiating staff from a separate, distant "you." Once I did this enough times, I found myself letting go of an implicit assumption I'd been carrying around my whole life: namely, that "you" and "I" naturally operate independently of one another.

In order to actually *become* an organizer, though, I had to get a crash course in the difference between tactics and strategy. It was a question I'd never considered before, and it was a revelation.

There's a persistent glitch experienced by workers in the nonprofit sphere, which is that our vision of how to best go about creating the world we want to see is too often disconnected from the tasks our time is spent on in the day-to-day. (In nonprofits, this glitch is tied to the precarity and conditionality of funding; in industry, a similar challenge is posed by the need to demonstrate quarter-over-quarter growth, and in government it's inseparable from bureaucracy.)

Over time, passionate organizers become jaded or burn out. Our community members also feel the impact of these cumulative distractions, delays, and broken promises, and can disengage out of frustration, despair, or anger. At the most fundamental level, organizers must continually ask ourselves: if we're not credible and relevant in the communities we claim to serve, then what are we even doing?

The facilitator at a strategic planning meeting I once attended liked to describe this question of core organizational functionality as "table stakes." A former colleague calls prioritizing tactics to iteratively build toward a greater strategic vision "determining the order of operations." I realized I needed to take ownership of my organization's strategic vision, rather than outsourcing that responsibility (and the tough tradeoff analysis questions that come with it) to my bosses.

In other words, throughout my professional life I'd been holding myself accountable for *what* work product I was putting out in the world, and for *why* I thought it was appropriate and potentially impactful. But I'd been punting on the question of *how will I know if I've been*

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successful, assuming bosses or managers would let me know if I was failing to measure up. Once I realized that I could, and had to, continually answer that question myself, I was able to redirect my energies from demonstrating mere productivity into prioritizing effectiveness – including by directly reckoning with barriers I'd previously felt powerless to do anything about.

When I had the opportunity to move into a product management role at another organization, the rest of the pieces clicked into place for me. The flat, collaborative-by-necessity structure of product teams, and the built-in, constant user-feedback loops, make explicit that success must be a communal goal and is a communal achievement. Having an entire job organized around the principle that we can and will help build a solution to directly address real people's stated, granular problems – meeting defined user needs by creating new capabilities tailored to them, rather than offering what we've come up with on our own and hoping it's well-received – has been galvanizing.

I took over my organization's product lead role two weeks before one digital tool was scheduled to launch, two years after another had launched, and three years after our third. No documentation had been created, and most of the digital, data, and development teams had turned over in the interim. While it was daunting receiving regular bug reports on tools I was just beginning to get acquainted with, the experience gave me an immediate sense of empathy for our users; on top of struggling with an interface that didn't act as they expected or needed it to, these poor folks were also being called upon to serve as an institutional memory repository and help get a new person up to speed.

As a DC-based nonprofit with users at community-based organizations, municipal governments, and health care centers all over the country, I had to find a somewhat circuitous path to getting in the same room with the people I knew I needed to talk with – directly and at length – about their problems and needs. So I spent my first six months investing in building relationships and trust with our field staff, who knew our users best, and who had traditionally not had much sustained interaction with digital folks or involvement in work on our digital tools.

Through these conversations, we were able to identify key users among our "Super Admin" cohort – folks who'd had a few years of experience on our tools, were responsible for some level of training and troubleshooting new users at their organizations, and consistently lifted up good questions about technical issues that affected our users universally. We sent out a survey to all users asking folks what improvements or new features would make their work easier, and field staff reached out to our key users individually to encourage them to participate.

With the results in hand, I clustered similar user stories, and ordered clear dependencies, to create a draft product backlog. I then sat down with liaisons from the field, data, and digital teams to review each item individually, to learn how my colleagues thought it might touch their work and whether they thought any ask should be refined (or required further investigation).

Each team – which was used to competing for resources rather than working collaboratively – was empowered to present their own prioritization of the cleaned-up backlog, and these were averaged to calculate the semi-final prioritization. Given a three-month total window for shipping code and a limited developer budget, I then worked with our development vendor to scope the backlog and finalize the prioritization of user stories for our first sprint.

As development work got underway, our policy team was in the process of planning our organization's annual conference, and was soliciting session proposals. I asked my boss if he'd support a request for the digital team to host and facilitate a closed-door focus group with as many of our key users as would be able to attend; although it felt like a big ask because we'd never done it before, my boss (and his boss) was enthusiastic, and the focus group ended up being one of the best-reviewed sessions at the conference (in addition to proving immensely valuable to my team). The insights we gained helped me both further refine our product backlog and build direct relationships with key users that greatly improved our responsiveness to their critical needs in the months ahead.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also note that I quickly learned that all three of our tools carried a substantial amount of tech debt (one to the point where if the organization had continued in existence for another year, the tool should have been rebuilt from scratch or taken offline). Getting the opportunity to collaborate on surfacing problem statements and mapping out user stories before development has begun, and contributing to generating an RFP and contract that stakeholders fully understand and feel collective ownership of, is hopefully the exciting next step!

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