



# SECRETS OF A SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZER

ALEXANDRA BRADBURY, MARK BRENNER, AND JANE SLAUGHTER



## LESSON 2: ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATIONS

Now that you've learned about the bullseye model, maybe you're breathing a sigh of relief that your workplace is not the most "apathetic" on the planet.

But how do you find out which issues your co-workers care about, and which obstacles are holding them back? How do you encourage more of them to move from disengaged to supportive, and then to active, and then to joining your core group of organizers?

It's simple: you talk with them.



## GETTING TO KNOW YOU



Photo by Daniel L. Johnson/Woodstock Photo

In Rochester, New York, civil service worker Bess Watts learned the importance of one-on-one conversations after she decided to found a local chapter of Pride at Work, the AFL-CIO group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members.

To kick things off, the fledgling group advertised a public forum for LGBT workers. But the event was a failure—speakers outnumbered attendees.

Watts realized that outreach would have to be more personal, and that the group would have to make people feel safe. Few LGBT workers in the area were “out” on the job.

So she began personally approaching LGBT workers from different unions to ask if they would help form a chapter. That worked better.

"We focused on creating relationships," Watts says, "rather than fixating on growing membership numbers."

She also quickly realized that "you can't expect people to support your cause if you don't support theirs." So to build relationships, Pride at Work members walked picket lines, made signs, worked phonebanks, and canvassed for any union who needed help.

"My wife claims I drank beer with blue-collar union guys for two years before asking for their support for same-sex marriage equality," Watts says.

It worked. When the legislature began discussing marriage equality in New York state, almost every union in Rochester—including the police and firefighters—actively pushed for the bill.

In fact, Rochester unions were instrumental in moving the Republican-controlled Senate to vote yes. A local Republican senator, who had voted against equality in the past, became the first to break ranks with his party and support it.

"I could not have been prouder of my union sisters and brothers," Watts says. "Now Pride at Work is an integrated part of the Rochester labor community. We pulled LGBT workplace concerns out of the closet by creating visibility and building relationships."

**'We focused  
on creating  
relationships.'**



## YOU GOTTA LOOK THEM IN THE EYE



Slobodan Dujicov

Email, texting, leaflets, Facebook, and websites are great—but as Bess Watts found out, they can't take the place of one-on-one conversations. Talking face to face is still the best way to get people involved and convince them to take action.

It's easy to read a leaflet and then toss it. But when a real person is asking you, it's harder to say no.

Remember from Lesson 1 that you have to diagnose the obstacles to organizing. What looks like apathy might really be fear, hopelessness, confusion, or division. A flyer can't figure out what's holding people back, nor can it help them to get over it. For

that you need two-way communication. You have to talk with your co-workers—and more important, listen to them.

Where can these conversations happen? In the break room, the cafeteria, the parking lot, or even while you're working (if that's feasible at your job).

But many organizers have found that a more relaxed and honest conversation is possible when you're both off the clock, and not someplace where "the walls have ears." If you have a chance to grab a coffee or a beer with your co-workers, or join their carpool, take it! You'll find out things you never knew.

When a real person is asking you, it's harder to say no.



## TWO EARS, ONE MOUTH

Organizing involves a lot more listening than talking. Try the 80/20 rule—listen 80 percent of the time, talk 20 percent. Or at least get your share down to a third: you have two ears and one mouth, so use them proportionately.

This can be hard, especially when you're excited, or when you have information that others lack. But listening is crucial if you're going to find out what makes someone tick.

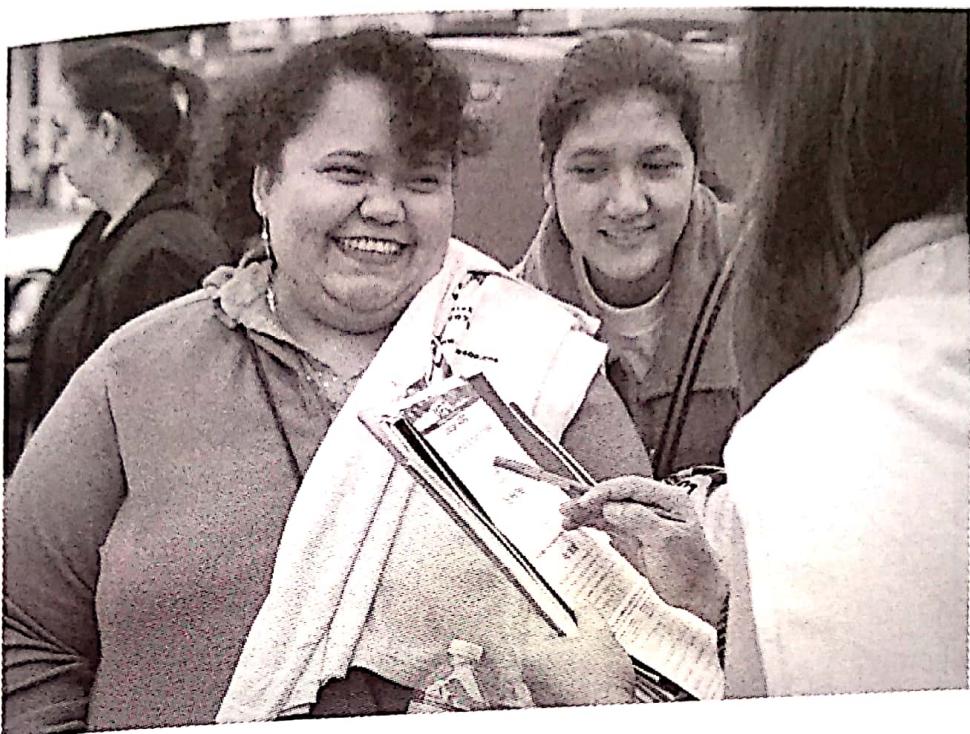
Consider your own experience. How does it feel to be talked at by someone who only seems interested in the sound of her own voice? Or when a friend is so wrapped up in his own concerns that you can't get a word in edgewise?

When you got a chance to say what was on your mind, weren't you a lot more invested in the conversation and whatever came after it?

When your  
co-workers tell  
you what they  
care about,  
remember it.

"You have to listen," says Maria Martínez, who was the chief steward in the meatpacking plant you read about in Lesson 1, where members organized against harassment. "It's really important to let people let out their feelings and for them to see that someone cares about what they have to say."

UFCW Local 400 (CC BY 2.0) [bit.ly/1oNT5dN](http://bit.ly/1oNT5dN)



"Then you can ask them, 'What do you think we should do about it?' You can say, 'I think we should do this.' But I've learned it's more effective when the ideas come out of them."

To get the other person talking, ask open-ended questions. For example: "What would you like to see in the next contract?" Don't assume you already know the answer. Avoid questions that will probably get you a simple yes or no, such as: "Would you like a raise in the next contract?"

When your co-workers tell you what they care about, remember it. Later on, when you're asking them to take some kind of action, your success will depend on showing how that action relates to the issues that matter to them.



## HOW TO BE A GOOD LISTENER

- **Avoid distractions.** Look the other person in the eye, and put your phone away.
- **Slow down.** Our brains process thoughts four times faster than spoken words. It's easy to skip ahead in a conversation, using your assumptions to fill in the gaps and plan your response. Resist this urge. Focus on what is actually being said.
- **Don't interrupt.** Take the time to hear the full story.
- **Keep an open mind.** Don't assume you already know what someone cares about. People will surprise you.
- **Don't fish.** Avoid leading questions like "Don't you agree that..."
- **Practice empathy.** Sometimes people need to let off steam. Don't discourage them. Your immediate task is to hear what they have to say, not to judge.
- **Show that you hear what they're saying.** React, ask follow-up questions, and repeat back what you understood. If you don't understand, ask.

## Lesson 2: One-on-One Conversations

- **Find common ground.** You don't have to agree with every point, but look for areas of agreement, and acknowledge where you differ.
- **Don't feel you need to sell something.** An organizer is not a salesperson. You're genuinely looking to learn the other person's point of view and create something new together.

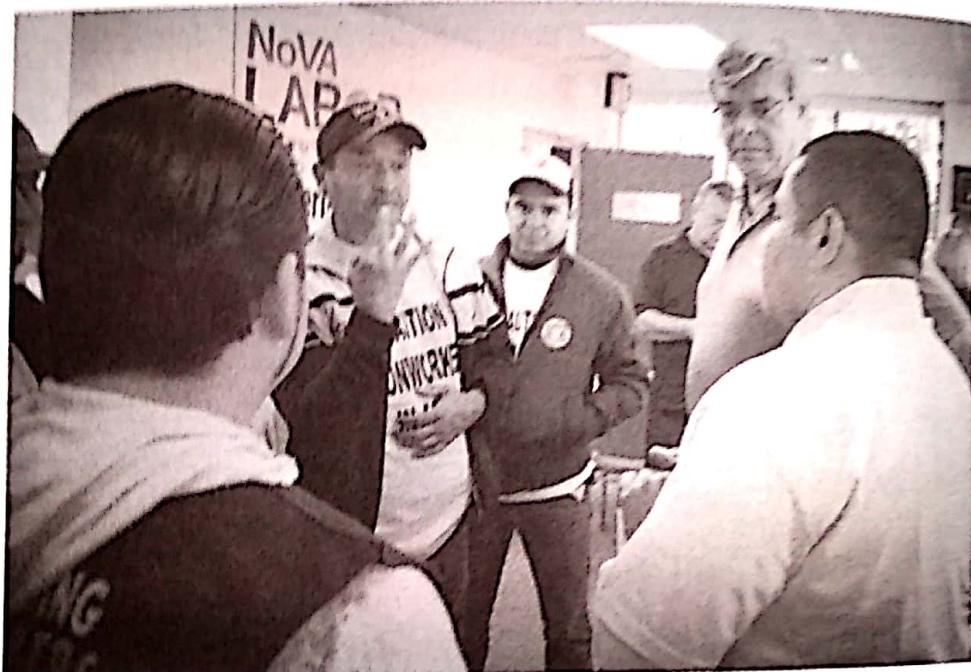


Adapted from "Effective Listening"  
by David Kameras, *Steward Update*  
*Newsletter*, Union Communication Services

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# IT ALL STARTS WITH RESPECT



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When the relationships are tight, everyone feels safer and it's easier to take risks.

When you have self-respect, it means you won't put up with bullying or exploitation. When you respect your co-workers, it means you value their experience and know they have something important to add to the plan for solving problems at work.

You can't just declare respect. It's built by forming personal relationships, the kind where you have each other's backs—like Bess Watts did by getting to know those “blue-collar union guys” in Rochester, drinking beer together

and walking their picket lines. That doesn't happen overnight.

Why do we have to make it personal? Because organizing is scary for most people, at times even ourselves. No one wants to get in trouble for rocking the boat. The most effective way to address that fear is to link people together. When the relationships are tight, everyone feels safer and it's easier to take risks. Superficial connections won't withstand management's pressure tactics.

Kay Eisenhower was a "founding mother" of a Service Employees local in Alameda County, California. She recalls, "One of my favorite examples from the hospital was when the clerks got together to create a break space out of a deserted nurses station. We cleaned out the refuse, brought plants and kitchen stuff from home—we carved out our own little space."

It was a space where connections were reinforced every day, and more important because the clerks had made it themselves.



## IN-DEPTH CONVERSATIONS

When new leaders took over the Chicago Teachers Union in 2010, they inherited a tradition of phonebanking for political candidates. But they turned phonebanking into a way to have in-depth conversations with members.

"The heart of our trainings," said organizer Matthew Luskin, "was to keep people from treating these like calls to get someone out to an event. Instead it was about learning members' concerns, along with discussing the strategy to win."

"We wanted to make sure that younger members were in dialogue with the union activists, that we were listening to what issues were important to them, what they were willing to fight for, what fears they had."

New members were often the least involved with the union, and the most scared to take action. So in the year before the union's contract expired, phonebanks focused on calling members with three years or less.

Special education teacher Margo Murray says the union's organizing department trained her to describe the school board's goals, listen to members' thoughts, and project a vision of how the union could win.

Members were asked to do something—come to a rally, attend a training, join their school's contract

committee or parent outreach, or fill buses to the state capital. Callers also advised members to save money in their personal "strike funds," in case of a strike.

"At first the response was, 'I'm not going on strike, I have all these student loans, I can't afford to spend any time out of work,'" Murray said. "I would say, 'Can you afford to spend time *in* work if they end up destroying our contract?'

"I talked about the things they wanted to take away from us, and one of the biggest things was lanes and steps [which gave higher pay for more education and seniority]. I said, 'If they take that away, you'll get no credit in your pay for getting that expensive degree.'

"I went into the history: what happens when unions have to go up against management and we end up being divided instead of united," she said. "The conversation usually lasted 20 or 30 minutes. By that time they were extremely receptive."



Ronnie Reese, CTU



## PEOPLE MOVE LITTLE BY LITTLE

Remember the bullseye chart from Lesson 1. You're not trying to move someone from disengaged to organizer in one conversation, but maybe from disengaged to supportive, or from supportive to active, or from active to part of the core group. Slow and steady wins the race.

There's one major exception to this rule. When people are in a high-stakes fight where they're forced into action against a powerful enemy, it can change their thinking overnight. But most times, you will make better progress, and be less prone to disappointment, if you expect people to dip their toes in gradually.

Don't give up on people because of one "no." They may warm up over time. There may be things they're willing to do that neither of you has thought of yet.





## ONE STEP AT A TIME

Organizer Paul Krehbiel remembers talking to a medical technologist at Los Angeles County Hospital, who complained that the union didn't do much. Krehbiel asked him to sign a petition about a workplace problem.

"What's the point?" the guy asked. "It won't do any good."

Krehbiel explained that the petition alone wasn't expected to fix the problem, but it was part of a long-term campaign. If the petition didn't get results, the stewards were planning to attach it to a group grievance. Next they would get as many people as possible to attend the grievance meeting and speak out. The technologist signed the petition.

Sure enough, even after 70 percent of the workers signed, management refused to fix the problem. So the union filed a group grievance.

The next time Krehbiel saw him, the medical technologist was more interested. He asked if the grievance meeting had been set yet, and he brought up a complaint he and some others had on another issue. Just a little bit of participation had begun to change his perspective.



## GET SPECIFIC

Choose a  
manageable  
task, at least  
to start off.

Ask your co-workers to take a specific action. Choose a manageable task. Don't make it seem like an open-ended commitment. Be clear about how much time it will take, why you're doing it, and how it fits into the overall plan.

Here's an unproductive approach: "A few of us are carrying the whole burden and doing everything in the union. We really need you to get involved." (This request has the added disadvantage of being a guilt trip.)



What's a better way? "We're trying to reach 200 people about the dangerous temperatures in the plant lately. Can you be a part of the phonebank next Tuesday or Wednesday night?" This request defines the task (make calls), the time (Tuesday or Wednesday night), the goal (reach 200 people), and the issue (dangerous temperatures).

If this co-worker had never phonebanked before, you could improve the request further by explaining what to expect. "A few of us will sit together for two hours and call our co-workers. You'll have a list of phone numbers and a loose script to help you along, including three questions we're asking everybody. Afterwards we'll tally the answers and discuss what we learned."

### MAKE SIGNS FROM SCRATCH

If you're planning a picket, hold a sign-making party ahead of time. A party will bring members together, let them discuss the boss's latest outrage, and encourage them to show their creativity. The sign-makers will be proud of their signs and will show up to picket.



## RED-SHIRT FRIDAYS



Chicago Teachers Union

As the Chicago teachers built up to their 2012 strike, one tactic they used to get people warmed up for bigger actions—and to keep track of their growing support—was asking members to wear red every Friday.

The genius of "wear red" is its simplicity. It's something concrete and low-risk that a steward can ask anyone to do, even someone who has no extra time.

At first, many members would just wear a red scarf or a red-patterned blouse on Fridays. But the visibility helped to calm fears. Co-workers who were on the fence could see for themselves the growing level of union support as red spread throughout their school.

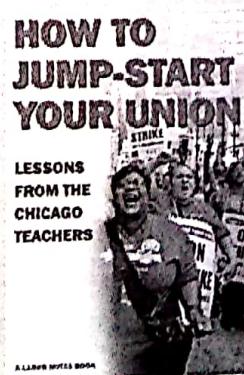
The weekly action also gave stewards a reason to talk regularly with their co-workers. Any excuse for a conversation is another organizing opportunity.

Charlotte Sanders was a steward working to organize her fellow paraprofessionals, scattered across many different schools. "On Thursday I would send a text and say, 'Tomorrow is spirit day,'" she said. "I made personal phone calls, which was good because I could touch base about how their week went."

As excitement and confidence grew, more and more people ordered red union T-shirts. The union started selling them at its monthly delegates' meetings. "People would come in with orders for their whole school," recalled Debby Pope, a grievance rep.

Administrators noticed. Students noticed. Members loved it. Many sent in group photos from their schools, all in red, for the union website. At the height of the campaign, nine out of 10 schools had members wearing red on Fridays in big numbers.

When the strike came, Sanders told her co-workers, "This is going to be your red badge of courage." Red T-shirts became the strike uniform, and community members recognized what they stood for.



Read more in  
*How to Jump-  
Start Your Union.*

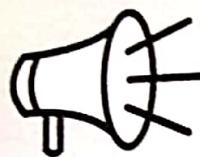


## LESSON 7: ALWAYS BE ORGANIZING

We hope you've taken a break while reading this book to go out and put the lessons into practice. Maybe you've gotten a few co-workers together, planned an action, even made your employer give in. Feels good, doesn't it?

But we know that bosses can be pretty relentless. Their bosses force them to be. You can be sure they'll be back tomorrow with more harassment or stupid rules. How can you create an atmosphere in the workplace that makes it hard for supervisors to bully and easy for workers to enforce fair standards?

For that, you need a group that stays in touch in between fights. Remember the bullseye model we discussed in Lesson 1? You need a core group and a circle of volunteers who are willing to do something when the need arises.



## HARRY BRIDGES PROWLS POWELL'S

"Harry Bridges works at Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon," reports Michael Ames Connor. "He keeps an eye out for fellow workers. At least, that's what they say."

"The story, repeated by members of the West Coast Longshore union (ILWU), goes something like this: Every once in a while, over the store intercom, comes a page for Harry Bridges. 'Harry Bridges to the front register.' 'Harry Bridges to the loading dock.'

"These union folks who work at Powell's know that Harry has been dead for years. But they know his

reputation—a fierce ILWU fighter who led the 1934 longshore strike that established the union. Part of joining ILWU means learning about their union, and learning what Harry Bridges stands for. They know that if he's going to check out the loading dock, they should, too.

"When they get there (and it's usually 30 or 40 people who show up), they find one of their co-workers in a little difficulty with the boss. A disagreement, an argument, a confrontation. Before they show up, maybe the boss is taking a hard line, getting ready to make an example of someone, thinking about tossing

## Lesson 7: Always Be Organizing

a troublemaker out the door. That's why Harry Bridges gets the call.

"So 30 or 40 people show up, and the manager backs down. Happens every time. With one or two people there, the boss can do what he likes. But with 30 or 40 people, as Arlo Guthrie once pointed out, you got yourself a movement."

"Nobody's ever seen Harry Bridges at Powell's. They just know he's there, watching to make sure nobody gets picked on, or picked off."

Sarah Race





## A LITTLE STRUCTURE GOES A LONG WAY

The key is to build enough structure for the issues you're dealing with.

The Powell's story shows a workplace culture where solidarity is the norm—using a system of communication that's simple yet powerful.

You may not need anything complicated where you work. The key is to build enough structure for the issues you're dealing with.

There's no reason to have a parliamentarian and a sergeant-at-arms for a meeting of five or 10, but you will need a chair.

A regular lunch get-together in the cafeteria, or a meeting after work for a beer, may be all you need. Or you may need to build an official stewards council. Whatever the size, successful organization requires:

- **Communication.** It can be informal—a conversation at work or over coffee—or more formal, through a member-to-member network, where each person is assigned certain co-workers to talk with. Communication can include newsletters, leaflets, and social media, but it has to prioritize one-on-one, face-to-face conversations.

- **Accountability.** Activists know they can count on each other. They follow through and do what they said they would do when they said they would do it.
- **Solidarity.** An injury to one is an injury to all. Solidarity is built by being considerate and helpful to each other, rejecting favoritism, focusing on what we have in common, and developing a sense of family among co-workers.

### POWER IS THE GOAL

For a group of workers to have collective power on the job, they need participation on three levels:

1. One or more **leaders** who put thought into what's happening at work, speak up, and propose action.
2. A normally small **group of co-workers** who work with and assist the leaders.
3. The support of **most or all of the rest** of the work group.



## SOCIALIZE TO ORGANIZE



Community Farmworker Alliance

"You can't expect people to march in the streets together if they don't even know each other's names," says Adam Heenan of the Chicago Teachers Union. As a union delegate (steward), he sees it as part of his job to help members at his school get to know each other.

"My thing has always been 'socialize to organize to mobilize,'" Heenan said.

This is not new advice. Since workers began to organize, they've been meeting at the bar after work or at the coffee shop beforehand. In the days when workers were more likely to live in the same

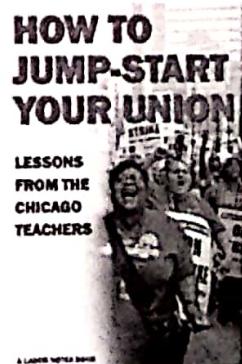
neighborhood, near their workplace, and have ethnic clubs, social clubs, or churches in common, it was easier to bring people together outside work.

Today, we live farther apart and our commutes can be long. Because our lives are so busy, we often bolt for home the minute the whistle blows. Still, it's important to get together away from the supervisor's prying eyes, even if it's just for lunch during the workday.

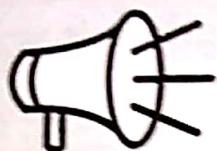
Often it's conversations about our lives away from work that cement our respect for each other as human beings, and build the loyalty we need to stick together.

In Heenan's case, he went to a union caucus meeting, held at a deli, before he ever went to an official union meeting. "We ordered food and talked about issues," Heenan said. "I was surprised by the way everyone let each other talk and gave their opinions." The Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators was also doing movie screenings and running a reading group—plenty of chances for people to get to know each other and get involved on whatever level they chose.

'You can't expect people to march in the streets together if they don't even know each other's names.'



Read more in  
*How to Jump-  
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## BREAKFAST CLUB

At UPS in Columbus, Ohio, a breakfast club helped part-time workers organize.

Nick Perry worked in the wee hours to sort packages by zip code and place them onto UPS's big brown trucks. "Our shift ends at 9 a.m. and we found ourselves talking in the building till 10:30," Perry remembers. "That naturally grew into going out to eat. We weren't thinking of organizing at first, it was more just empathy—venting and getting advice.

"So every Friday we would go out to breakfast and talk about what was going on at work, how to confront the supervisors who saw their job as constantly speeding us up. It started with four people and grew to nine. The managers started to notice and make fun of us, so we knew it was working."

'People felt  
way more  
confident than  
they ever had.'

Sorters were expected to lift 1,800 to 2,200 packages per hour, and the conveyor belt frequently got overloaded, with packages falling every which way. Workers had the right to stop the belt for safety, but most were afraid to exercise this right.

"The people who wanted to stop the belt were those who went to the Breakfast Club," said Perry. "People did, and found out they could get away with it, and that gave people more courage."

They started keeping a tally of how many times each worker cut off the belt. Workers would high-five whoever turned it off the most.

When Perry was moved to the late afternoon shift, he started a "wings club," where workers went out for wings after work. "We also started buying food and brought it in and shared it for our 10-minute break," he said, "and that really pissed management off."

"We went from cutting off the belt, to having members call OSHA, to filing Labor Board charges. People felt way more confident than they ever had."

### THE MEETING BEFORE THE MEETING

Another breakfast club operated in a Seattle Plumbers and Pipefitters local. This one was formed by black workers who were facing discrimination from their local and from their fellow members. Eventually it grew to welcome other workers of color and women.

This club met on Saturdays before the monthly union meeting. When one of the members wanted to bring something up at the union meeting, the group would discuss it and get others' ideas and help, "so you're not just standing there by yourself," as one member put it.

The club also campaigned to get people into apprenticeships, to defend affirmative action in the state, and for union office.



# EVERYONE SHOULD BE PLUGGED IN

No one should be far from someone who's in the know.

You may not have access to an intercom like the one at Powell's Books. But you can figure out a way to set up your own word-of-mouth "intercom"—like a phone tree, but in person—to keep folks in regular touch with each other and with union activities.

You might organize it as a member-to-member network or as a small committee in each work area. The exact structure doesn't matter. The important thing is to have a dense web of organization, so that no worker is far from someone who's in the know.

## MEMBER-TO-MEMBER NETWORK

A member-to-member network is made up of volunteers who commit to talking with certain co-workers, both on a regular basis and when the network is "activated."

Ideally, each volunteer should be responsible for no more than 10 co-workers. Fewer is better—it makes the job easier and gets more people involved. Build on the networks that already exist, including social ties and people who see each other at work.

You also need a handful of network coordinators, who stay in touch with the volunteers and meet

Chicago Teachers Union

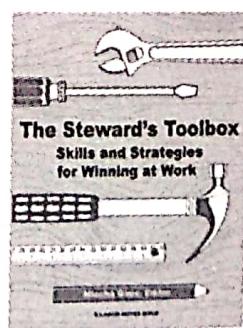


regularly. Information from the coordinators can be disseminated quickly to the entire workforce, almost as fast as over an intercom.

Information should flow from the bottom up, too. Coordinators should use the network to seek feedback: How is the new system for transfers working? Has the night-shift supervisor shaped up?

Volunteers should be proactive about asking co-workers for their concerns, and passing that info to the coordinators: “Everyone wants to know why we gave \$1,000 to the candidate for sheriff.”

Your activist network should complement the steward structure. Stewards might make natural coordinators, or it might work better to recruit different members for the job. In any case, the network must work hand in glove with the stewards. Avoid turf wars.



Read more in  
*The Steward's  
Toolbox*.

## MINI-COMMITTEE

Another approach is to form a “union committee” of two or more stewards or activists for a work area, who keep everyone else in the loop. Your committee should have regular meetings, plus the occasional on-the-fly meeting when a crisis comes up.

Committee members should be elected or confirmed in a democratic way.

Committee members should be elected or confirmed in a democratic way. A California Service Employees local used a Steward Support Petition. “Anyone who wanted to be a steward had to get a majority in their work area to sign,” wrote organizer Paul Krehbiel. “We wanted as many stewards as we could get, no limits. A work area with 25 workers and three stewards is stronger than an area with just one steward.”

If the contract limits the number of stewards, that doesn’t stop workers from also electing informal alternate stewards or committee members. This network can protect the steward from retaliation and make the workload more manageable.

“Many people who would like to become a steward don’t do so because they fear the burden will fall on their shoulders alone,” Krehbiel wrote. “When a group of people assumes a leadership role, the group generally comes up with better and bolder ideas, and feels they have the strength and support to carry them out.”



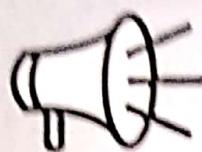
### EXERCISE: SKETCH OUT A MEMBER NETWORK

Go back to your workplace map from Lesson 3. Can you start to see who would make good volunteers and who their assigned contacts would be? Think of the natural leaders, and of people who could be brought along with some training. Consider how to cover all the work groups and social groups.

Make up a first draft of a member-to-member network for your department or workplace. It's only a draft, of course. You will need to do the slow work of getting buy-in from the volunteers, and they will have their own ideas of who they want to stay in touch with.



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## KEEP IT GOING



AFSCME Local 3299

A member-to-member network is often cemented during a contract fight. But don't let it wither away afterward! The structure needs to be continually and immediately available.

Put the network structure up on a wall chart or track it in a spreadsheet. Continually check to make sure no members have dropped out, and replace them if they have.

At the University of California campuses and hospitals, blue-collar workers with AFSCME Local 3299 expanded their Member Action Teams through a 2012 contract fight.

Organizers began with one-on-one conversations to identify the people most respected by their co-workers. They got to know these leaders by learning their stories and motivations. "We all

"have different reasons why we're involved," said Monica De Leon, a unit secretary. "This organizing is personal."

The organizers asked potential MAT leaders to:

- Bring co-workers to a picket or a departmental meeting, showing that their co-workers would follow their lead.
- Sign a pledge committing to the work of a MAT leader.
- Ask their co-workers to sign a pledge, too, to join in actions like picketing to win a good contract.

In less than a year, the union identified and recruited a battalion of new MAT leaders, bringing the total from fewer than 200 to 600. And most stayed active after the contract campaign was past.

"They are driving the workplace fights, defending the contract, and identifying other leaders of the union," said President Kathryn Lybarger. They're also tasked with signing up non-members.

The structure needs to be continually and immediately available.



## MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

"Those of us in the Heat and Ventilation Department at Massachusetts Institute of Technology had a problem," writes Paul McCafferty. "Our Service Employees shop steward, an experienced worker of 20 years, was resigning.

"No one was immediately interested in the job. A steward had a lot of stress, had neither super-seniority nor dues reduction, and could make enemies with both management and co-workers." It didn't help that the 35 workers were spread across three shifts, seven days, and six supervisors.

"A group of us came up with the idea of a shared, rotating stewardship. The idea was that four of us would share the steward position. We would each stand a three-month watch, and after a year we'd see how it had worked.

"We wrote up this idea, along with the names of the volunteers, posted it over the time clock, and asked our co-workers to sign the sheet as an endorsement. The majority signed, and we got the support of our business agent. Soon the four of us were armed with grievance forms, a new system, and no experience."

'The idea was that four of us would share the steward position.'

Over the next three years, eight people served three-month steward

terms. (Some volunteered more than once.)

"The most important change we saw," McCafferty says, "was that the union was viewed less as an insurance plan, and more as something that we all had to make work. Because eight of us had processed grievances, there was a more widespread understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the grievance procedure.

"The biggest drawback to rotation is that a new steward, by definition, has little experience. So mistakes can be made. But beyond the first step in a grievance, the business agent is present. This is a big help to new stewards. And because there is a growing pool of present or former stewards, it's easy to get advice informally. Each year, as more workers get involved, more grievances are settled with the immediate supervisor.

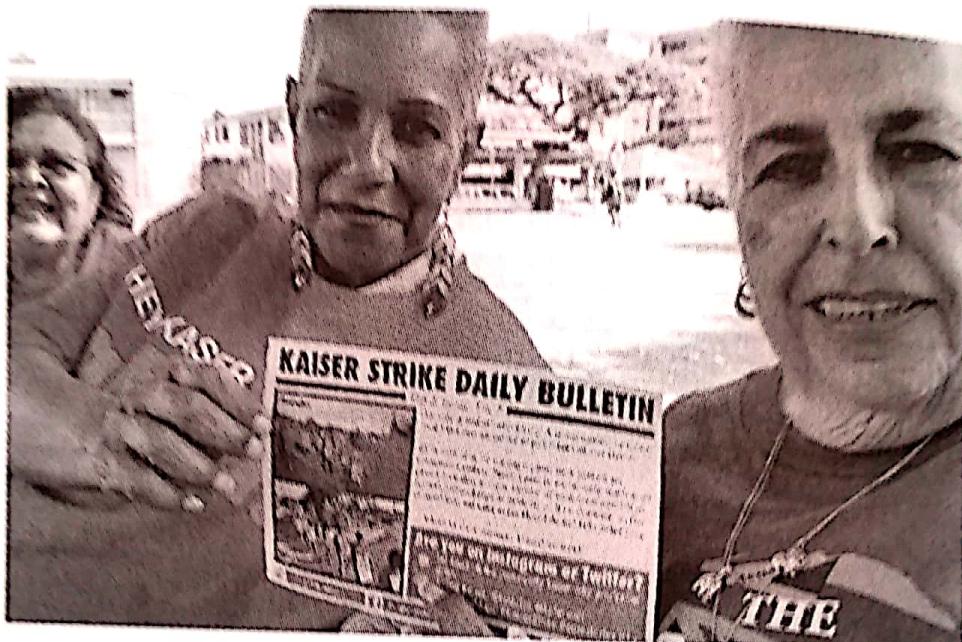
"The biggest advantage of rotation is that it offers a manageable way for workers to get involved in the union. A commitment is required, but it's limited.

"In short, more hands, less work. More involvement, less burnout."

'The union was viewed less as an insurance plan.'



## CREATE A CONVERSATION-STARTER



UNITE HERE Local 5

Over the years, shop floor newsletters and leaflets have been great organizing tools. These days many organizers use email lists and Facebook groups for a similar purpose.

Your publication is only as good as the real-life conversations it starts among co-workers.

But remember, whether you're using paper or pixels—it's a tool for organizing, not a substitute. Your publication is only as good as the real-life conversations it starts among co-workers and the action it provokes at work, where your power is.

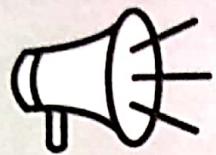
The introverts among us may be tempted to just leave a stack of flyers on the break room table, or post a link on Facebook, and call that organizing. These shortcuts won't get you far.

Instead, an organizer should see every article, meme, status update, or newsletter as a prompt to start conversations like the ones you read about in Lesson 2.

When doing a survey, for instance, don't just hand them out. Offer to sit with the person and answer any questions as he or she fills it out. Even better, hold a "survey day" where everyone fills them out at the same time. That starts discussions.

### WHAT A LEAFLET CAN DO

- **Create an opportunity for conversations.** "Hey, have you seen this? What do you think?"
- **Direct attention to your issue.** Especially when one co-worker sees another reading your leaflet, it can get people talking.
- **Create a distribution network.** The idea is for information to flow in all directions along this network, not just top-down from Leaflet Central.



## MAKING THE BOSS LOOK RIDICULOUS



Michael Gould-Wartofsky

**'We forced them to back down by raising so much hell at the worksite.'**

to a candy wrapper someone stuck through the cracks. But one union uses its bulletin boards to deflate management's credibility.

When state workers in New Jersey are involved in a fight, says Hetty Rosenstein, "we strip the bulletin board and turn it into a billboard," perhaps just a short slogan in huge letters. "It's amazing

Union contracts often include the right to a bulletin board in the workplace. Some are pretty drab—a faded union meeting notice from last year locked in a glass cabinet, next

impact this has," she says. "Management can't take it."

When one department was trying to eliminate seniority, Rosenstein recalls, "the union put up a picture of the department commissioner, but we made his head into a garbage can and showed job security being tossed into his head.

"It caused a huge furor. The top brass sent out notices to managers all over the state to take down pictures where the commissioner was a garbage can. They'd take down the pictures, and we'd put up another one, equally inflammatory.

"We grieved it and eventually won—the arbitrator said we had broad latitude to use our bulletin boards. And we forced them to back down on the seniority issue by raising so much hell at the worksite.

"I'm a great believer in ridicule. It debunks them and makes them seem less strong. It's easier to stand up to somebody who's ludicrous."



## WHY MAKE A NEWSLETTER?



Bernard Pollack (CC BY 2.0) [bit.ly/2L4eRV6](https://bit.ly/2L4eRV6)

Bringing  
bosses' actions  
into the light  
of day puts  
pressure on  
management.

Even in a social media-dominated world, a regular print newsletter can be a visible expression of the union's power in the workplace. People see that they're not alone in questioning management's authority. One worker turns to another and says, "Hey, get a load of this!"

Bringing bosses' actions into the light of day puts pressure on management, too. You can tell by the way they overreact to the printed word.

The newsletter can chew out management, inform workers about what's happening in other departments

and in the outside world, and offer criticisms and proposals to the union. It can also be the voice of a caucus. In a local that's very badly run, a rank-and-file newsletter can be one of the only ways that members find out what's going on.

A newsletter creates jobs for people with different sorts of skills—gathering news, writing, editing, cartooning, taking photos, designing, laying out, distributing, and fundraising. The more people involved, the stronger your credibility and base of support.

Anonymous newsletters have less credibility. Some newsletter groups, rather than putting a signature on each article, print a list of the names of everyone involved, to show that the newsletter is a collective product.

The more people involved, the stronger your credibility and base of support.



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## GIVE PEOPLE THE INFO THEY WANT

Before the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators won leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union, the group began publishing a monthly newsletter.

Each new issue was distributed at the monthly delegates (stewards) meeting. It featured news of forums and rallies the caucus was organizing, on issues union officers were ignoring. People started asking for bundles to hand out to everyone in their schools.

"At that time the union newsletter was big and glossy, with lots of pictures of the officers," said Kenzo Shibata, who ran communications for the caucus. "We just did a four-pager, with information on what was going on in the schools—and more people were reading our newsletter than were reading the official magazine."

**'More people were reading our newsletter than were reading the official magazine.'**

The caucus also had a busy email list and a blog displaying its many activities—again in stark contrast to the union's stale official website.



## DEFEND YOUR RIGHTS

John Zartman of Teamsters Local 355 in Baltimore, a member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), helped put out the *355 Informer*. The four-page newsletter regularly included a cartoon, a witty saying, columns with news from the different departments, and information on union rights.

The local leadership didn't react well. The president made several threats against the people putting out the *Informer*—but the activists knew they were protected against union retaliation by their International's constitution, federal labor law, and the First Amendment.

"We sent a letter saying we were not going to stop doing this," Zartman said. "I personally asked everyone involved in the newsletter, in writing, distributing, or whatever, if they wanted to sign the letter. Thirteen people put their names down."

TDU membership boomed, and there were other results, too. "We got a new business agent," Zartman said. "When we were getting ready to go into contract negotiations, the business agents wanted to know if they could submit an article to our newsletter."



## TAKING THE CONVERSATION ONLINE

Here are a few ways organizers have used *online* tools:

### VIRTUAL BREAK ROOM

An email list or Facebook group can be a forum to discuss issues, share information, draw up plans, and make contacts—off the clock and away from the boss.

Fast food workers at the Oregon Zoo communicated through a secret Facebook page when they organized to join Laborers Local 483. The online activities complemented an energetic on-the-job campaign that forged “zoolidarity” through actions such as a march on the boss.

“The Facebook page allowed us to answer questions about unions, address gossip at the zoo, announce organizing meetings, and later to respond to anti-union rumors that crept into the workplace,” said Matt Ellison, part of the organizing committee.

Zoo workers  
used Facebook to  
complement an  
energetic on-the-  
job campaign.



## CONNECTING ISOLATED WORKERS

Email and Facebook can allow information-sharing and discussion among people who don't regularly see each other on the job.

Educators at California Virtual Academies, who work from home teaching online classes, used three Facebook groups to communicate during their organizing drive. One group, the "CAVA Water Cooler," offered a place to socialize, share stories, and vent. The second group was for supporters. The third was a private meeting space for the organizing committee to plan.

The 40-person committee also met regularly through a videoconferencing app called Zoom. But the educators met in person several times, too. "Nothing's going to replace actually seeing each other," said member Cara Bryant.

'Nothing's going to replace actually seeing each other.'

## NETWORKING BETWEEN LOCALS

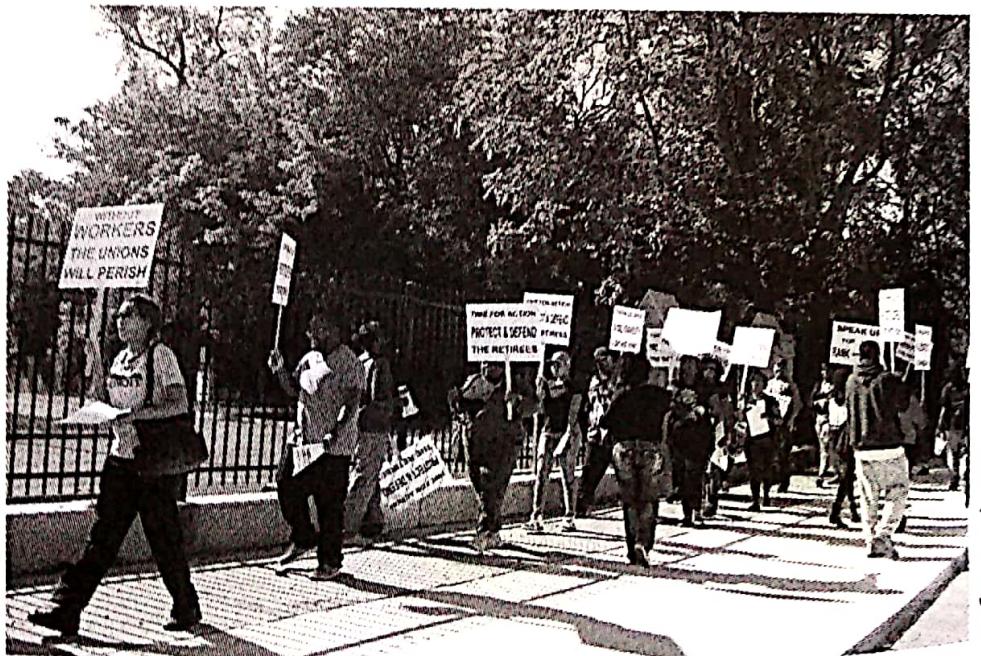
After teacher locals in a northern corner of Washington state organized one-day strikes against school underfunding, the "Badass Teachers" Facebook page helped the activity go viral. Soon, locals representing half the teachers in the state joined the strike wave.

Fired Portuguese dockworkers used Facebook to make contact even across national borders. Dockworkers in Spain turned away a ship loaded by scabs in Portugal—a crucial pressure point that helped the fired workers win back their jobs.

## RANK-AND-FILE RESISTANCE

Machinists Local 751 member Shannon Ryker started the “Rosie’s Machinists 751” Facebook page to rally Boeing workers against mid-contract concessions their International was pushing. Though the contract narrowly passed, the page became the seed for a new caucus.

Union dissidents such as rail workers, auto workers, and carhaulers stay in touch through email lists, conference calls, Facebook groups, and occasional in-person meetings. These methods helped Chrysler workers pull off a 2-to-1 “no” vote on their national contract in 2015, forcing bargainers back to the table to make improvements.





## PORTRAIT OF A WELL-ORGANIZED WORKPLACE

Leaders in one nurses union drew up this list to illustrate their vision of an ideal, well-organized workplace:

**The union is visible daily in the workplace to members and management.**

1. Stewards or union volunteers make regular walk-throughs and have relationships with all members, not just elected leaders.
2. There is a steward or union volunteer on every shift, in every department. The list is written down, regularly updated, and widely available.
3. Membership meetings are regular and well-attended.
4. A union representative attends every new-employee orientation.
5. There is regular communication through newsletters, flyers, up-to-date bulletin boards, and a member-to-member network.

**We defend our standards and enforce our contracts.**

6. Members mobilize and use collective action to solve everyday problems. Grievances are not our primary line of defense.

7. Contracts are widely available and promptly distributed, both electronically and in print.
8. Stewards are trained and empowered to resolve issues at the lowest level, including filing grievances.
9. Managers do not act unilaterally or abusively, because they know they will get blowback.

### **Members own the union.**

10. Members feel that their union is strong and can resolve problems.
11. Through stewards, members have immediate access to resources to resolve their problems, without having to track down the union rep.
12. Members participate in union-wide programs and campaigns.
13. Members are glad they belong to the union. Social events are well-attended.

Adapted from New York State Nurses Association



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