GTP ORGANIZER TRAINING

Training Guide #7
Organizational Structure & Culture

All talk about organizations relies on abstract conceptions, using words and their meanings, to make sense systematically of our experience and observations of people doing things together. A great deal of organizational life can be described and, more importantly, sometimes even understood, predicted, and influenced, with abstract ideas about structure and culture.

While there is no universal agreement or consistency in definitions of structural and cultural aspects of community organizations, grassroots organizers have some common usage and understandings.

Structural features of organization are formal, inflexible (except under special conditions and procedures), created and maintained by documentation, and contingency-centered: they set responsibilities, formal rights, and rewards or punishments on which individual behavior or group action is contingent. The structure is adopted "officially," by explicit decision, on the basis of known rules and procedures. It determines how the organization is supposed to operate and for what purposes.

Usually we mean by organizational culture those features that are informal, flexible (but often long-lived), created and maintained by word-of-mouth, and ideology-centered: they define good and bad, winning and losing, friends and enemies, etc. The cultural definitions of people, circumstances, events, objects, facts, processes, information, and so on, are essential for organizational decisions and movement.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE & STRUCTURE

Structural Features	*Cultural Features*
Contingency-centered	Ideology-centered
Formal	Informal
Fixed	Flexible
Documented	Word-of-mouth

In practice, of course, it isn't possible to separate structure and culture. So while we create organizational structure that spells out the positions to be filled by members of an organization, it's mostly culture that defines the roles that go with those positions and the kinds of people who will fill them.

Structure

The basic "artifact" of organizational structure is written documentation—constitutions and bylaws. Usually these documents begin with the broad goals and purposes of the organization, reflecting the core values and interests of the membership, constituency, or clientele.

Structural documentation may also spell out the organization's main resource base. For instance, many organizations ordinarily define their "classes" of membership in their constitutions or bylaws, sometimes even specifying the amount of annual dues for each. Similarly, the documentation defines formal offices or positions in the organization. But this isn't the same as labor division, that is, as specifying who does what actual work. The documentation may also limit tax-exemption alternatives.

Understandings about decision-making arrangements are set out in structural documentation. There are five general types of organizational decisions: structural, policy, management, supervision, and adjudication. To take one example, bylaws and constitutions define the actors and methods for making changes in the structure itself: in most grassroots organizations the total membership, meeting in annual assembly or congress, is solely empowered to change the basic structure. Policy matters are typically left to leadership bodies meeting more frequently. And management is often delegated to staff.

Culture

Cultural aspects of organizations are generally thought of as those that evolve in conversation and are in flux, constantly changing. In most instances organizational culture defines what things mean, whether they're valued as good or bad, right or wrong, and how things are to be done when answers can't be fixed by formal structure, policy, or procedure.

Within larger structural goals, it's the culture that carries organizational objectives. While the broad purposes of grassroots organizing are to bring together low- and moderate-income families for their political, economic, and social interests, goals that are laid out in basic documents, it's our more specific and immediate objectives for organizing membership drives, campaigns on issues, and program development that bring those goals to life. The objectives themselves are mostly within the culture of the organization.

The culture also promotes "operational ideologies," the meanings for contingencies in the organization's daily action life. In contrast to basic values, it's the transient operational ideology—formed, shaped, and transmitted in the course of common experience and discussion about that experience—that defines a double-talking city hall bureaucrat or a corporate flack-catcher as "no friend of the neighborhood."

The culture moves the organization ahead in very practical ways when it sets out the jobs that have to be done and the division of labor to do them. So while the structure may establish the positions of president, vice president, secretary, etc., it's the culture that says (in some retrogressive organizations) women will do the actual work and men will make the decisions. Culture plays another critical and parallel role by reflecting lessons learned in the past, thus avoiding replays of crisis situations. For instance, once an organization has learned that relying on a single leader to broker all of its internal interests creates dangerous vulnerability, its culture will encourage shared leadership. Similarly, organizations learn that relying completely on a single source of money doesn't sustain longevity.

Culture is probably felt more through its definition of roles than in any other way. It's the culture that defines how people conceive of the reasons and routes for their actions. Leaders are mainly under the hold of organizational culture when they know that, although they may do many things, usurping the decision-making authority of the mem-

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bership is fundamentally wrong and problematic. Similarly, staff recognition of when and when not to act often follows from an understanding of an unwritten "organizing model," another facet of the organization's culture. Overall, it's the culture that specifies appropriate and inappropriate behavior—reinforced by structural contingencies (rewards and punishments)—for members, leaders, staff, and even consultants.

Community Organizing Practice

One way to get a better practical understanding of structure and culture in community organizations is to look at grassroots organizing committees, the forerunners of many neighborhood associations and congregational organizations. Organizing committees are the keystones in new organizations. The O.C. isn't just the chronological mainspring of events that lead to an organization; it also shapes and often permanently sets the incipient organization's structure and culture. In fact, the failure of novice organizers and developers to recognize the impact of structure and culture—some rely almost exclusively on personal relationships and exhortation—accounts for a long list of organizational problems.

In our grassroots tradition, examples of structure and culture that develop early in the life of an organizing committee, directly affecting its meetings, are procedures and understandings for the meetings themselves. From the beginning, O.C. meetings, and the coming organization as well, are structured by the use of formal, written agendas, bylaws, and constitutions. These are "fixed" documents, permanently outlining procedural rights and responsibilities, requiring motions and votes to be changed, even if carried out casually. Such structure may be introduced by the use of "paper models," sample bylaws, from other organizations, circulated by more experienced participants. Although formal adoption doesn't normally happen until the founding meeting of the budding organization, the development of structure is pushed along by reference to these models.

On the other hand, understandings about the correct "tone" of O.C. meetings are mostly an informal matter, part of the culture, developing and changing in the course of conversation. During organizing drives, before the first O.C. meetings, I talk with residents about the need to have meetings that are both efficient and fun. When talking with leaders before the founding meeting, I personally model the appropriate behavior—my goal is to be efficient in dealing with business but in a light-mannered way that allows for having a good time—and I do the same at the first meeting of the organizing committee, insofar as there are natural opportunities.

The Organizer's Role

Much of the process for building culture involves setting expectations. I suggest the idea that while many roles and decisions are reserved exclusively to members and leaders, all of what the organizer knows or does is in time shared or transferred to them. This has immediate practical applications, so that from the beginning I ask individuals to serve as phone captains and make reminder calls for the first meeting, and as soon as possible I find someone to coordinate the captains.

At the start of building culture, definitions of the organizer's role create a long-lasting bias on the ways and means of staff influence. The goal in our tradition of organizing is structure and culture that, while permanently including professional staff, doesn't foster any kind of undesirable dependency.

For me, the essence of the organizer's role is coaching. Organizers help members and leaders "learn the plays," they guide and criticize the "scrimmage," and they often "referee" factional conflicts within the organization. But when the "team" is "on the

field," it elects its own "captains" as leaders and "plays its own game"—and the coach is there, but on the "sideline."

In my early contacts with neighborhood residents or congregational members, by frequent talk that sets expectations, I build into the culture the idea that the only problem the organization can't deal with is the one that people won't talk about—it's not only okay but inevitable that everyone in the organization will make mistakes, but it's not okay to repeat them over and over again. I replay these ideas regularly. In evaluating meetings and actions with leaders my aim is to get them to describe the strengths and weaknesses of their own performances.

Practice Keys

As grassroots organizers we know that the organizing committee is where issues and leaders are cultivated, where action plans are devised to resolve long-standing problems. We're only just beginning to learn, however, that the O.C. also presents a series of opportunities for organizing structure and culture that will underpin the long-range future of a neighborhood community and its organization.

The success of the organizing committee and, ultimately, the organization itself, depends very much on the organizer's understanding of structure and culture, and on an ability to bring about behavioral contingencies and ideological realities for their development.

These in turn depend on our relationships with members and leaders: While the kind of organizing "techniques" I've described are absolutely necessary, the work can only succeed when there is mutual respect, affection, and commitment shared by the organizer and the members of the organization.

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