

ORGANIZER TRAINING

GTP Training Guide #45 Credentialing

You walk into a bank. In the corner you see the loan officer. She looks unfriendly and there's a knot in the pit of your stomach as you begin imagining her questions: How long have you lived at your present address? Who knows you? How long have you been on the job? Who are all your creditors? And on and on.

What she's asking for are your bona fides, your financial *credentials*. In effect, she wants to know if you're a good risk, if the bank should invest in you. Implicit in her questions are several *unasked* questions: Are you of sound character—do you have integrity? Are you competent—can you do what you say you'll do? Are you committed—will you stick?

There are parallels between the situation of the banker's request for bona fides and the common circumstances of community organizing, particularly in an initial one-to-one contact, an organizational meeting, a research action, or an action on an issue. At the beginning of each of these situations, as we approach people who are strangers to us and to whom we are strangers, individually and collectively, we face a series of unasked questions. Often they remain unasked because individuals fear embarrassing us or themselves, want to avoid tension or conflict, or want to define us in their terms for their own purposes. Left unanswered, these questions create stumbling blocks to building trust and respect, which are foundations for relationship, and thus undermine participation by potential members and constructive relations with community decision-makers.

Everyone involved in community organizing—members, leaders, and organizers—needs to understand and master credentialing.

Let's look at the essential components of a credential in the three generic situations: one-to-one contacts (phone and in-person), meetings of various kinds, and actions (research or issue).

ON THE TELEPHONE

The one-to-one telephone credential aims to answer several questions: Who are you? Who sent you? Who else supports this? What are you proposing? What do you want from me?

Your credential in an initial *phone* contact might go like this:

1. Rabbi Neal at Congregation Beth Israel suggested I call you—my name is Moshe ben Asher.
2. I'm working with the Beth Israel congregational organizing committee.
3. The committee was formed with the blessing of the congregation board and Rabbi Neal to deal with problems in the city, like the drugs and gangs, that are affecting our families.

4. We're working with several other congregations, representing many families in the area.
5. I'm calling to arrange a visit with you, say for about 30 minutes.
6. Specifically, I'd like to hear your concerns about what's happening in the community (or city).

IN PERSON

At the beginning of an initial *in-person* contact, the first four statements are repeated, and the credential is expanded to answer in more detail the question, "Who supports this?" Names of key sponsors or members of the organization's board are given. At this time it's also appropriate to talk some about the relationship of the committee or organization to a larger organization or federation or network of organizations.

AT A MEETING

There are two significant changes when the credential is modified for a *meeting* of the organization. It incorporates a reference to the one-to-one building of relationships that is central to the organization's life, and the rabbi's legitimization is no longer crucial. Needless to say, the person who is chairing the meeting articulates the credential. It sounds like this:

1. My name is Bob Simon.
2. This is a meeting of the Beth Israel congregational organizing committee.
3. The organization was formed with the blessing of the Rabbi Neal and the congregation's board to deal with problems in the city that are affecting our families.
4. To date, we have reached out to more than 200 families in the congregation, listening to their concerns and visions for our city.
5. We're working with six other congregations, representing 2500 families, which is called the Congregations in Action.

Leaders and members often ask why it's necessary to repeat the credential at the beginning of every meeting, particularly when the people attending are regulars. The answer, which may not be obvious, is to ensure that everyone in the organization internalizes the credential, that is, learns to repeat it without having to think about it. Thus in actions, when leaders and members are under pressure to talk about the organization without formal preparation, they're prepared. In this way we avoid having others, whether media or political figures, defining who we are; we maintain control over the public definition of the organization. This point is often driven home for leaders when they read the first media coverage of an action by the organization, and the reporter has accepted and incorporated the credential in the story.

AT AN ACTION

The credential takes a number of critical turns in an action. No longer operating within the congregation but having moved out into a larger arena, the organization trans-

forms its persona, from congregational organizing committee to Congregational Community Organization. Power and the issue become important dimensions, and research—both formal and through one-to-ones—becomes part of the organization’s legitimization. As presented to a director of city parks and recreation who comes to the synagogue for a meeting of the “Beth Israel Congregational Community Organization,” it sounds like this:

1. I’m Rabbi Booth, senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, and I want to welcome you to a meeting of the Congregational Community Organization.
2. Our Community Organization is part of the alliance of Congregations in Action.
3. The alliance is represented tonight by 25 members from six of our participating congregations.
4. More than 300 members of our congregation are here tonight because of our deep concern about what’s happening with drugs and gangs in our communities and the demonstrated need to make more safe and supervised after-school recreation available for our children.
5. Our concerns are based on more than 200 visits to members of the congregation, in which they shared their personal experience and pain with trying to raise their children—about which we’ll hear more about in testimony further along in the meeting.
6. We’re also here to report to you the findings we have reached from conducting research interviews with public and private officials working in criminal justice, treatment, and prevention.

SUMMING UP

At the earliest stages of building the organization, when many people lack the commitment and discipline to use a structured organizational credential, frequently they report in accountability sessions that they’re unable to get appointments for one-to-one visits. When questioned in detail, often it turns out that they failed to present the organization’s credential at the outset, or they left out a critical component, such as the rabbi’s or board’s legitimization. Similarly, credential failures in meetings often lead to concern and occasionally confusion, especially among newcomers, about what and who the organization is and where it’s going.

If some of the folks in your meetings or one-to-ones are starting to look like bank loan officers, try articulating or fleshing out your organization’s credential. You’ll be amazed at the difference it makes.

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