

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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## NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING COMMITTEES

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Perhaps Moses considered the 70 leaders he gathered as an “organizing committee” (OC). It wouldn’t be surprising, because we know that these committees have formed in all places at all times, and certainly history shows that the elders served as such. Recent and current history are also populated with infinite variations on the OC theme—and it’s this more recent growth and use of organizing committees to which I owe my understanding of them.

My biggest debt is to Steve Kest and ACORN in Jersey City. Ken Smith of the Citizens Action League Compton Project confirmed and added to what I had learned earlier. I was tutored initially by Warren Haggstrom and by my reading about Cesar Chavez, Sidney Hillman, and the revolutionary Boston North End Caucus. My own independent work—with ANTE (Americans Nonpartisan for Tax Equity) in San Bernardino, ACW (Alternatives for California Women) in Oakland, and neighborhood associations in Baltimore—has been the basis for my theorizing about organizing committees.

Organizing committees are the keystones in new neighborhood organizations. The OC is more than the chronological mainspring of events that leads to an organization; it also shapes and may permanently set the incipient organization’s culture and structure. And the failure of novice organizers to recognize the influence of culture and structure—often they rely *excessively* on exhortation and personal relationships—accounts for a lengthy list of organizational problems.

### ***Building Culture & Structure***

While there’s no universal agreement or consistency in definitions of organizational culture and structure, we do have some common understandings. 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—that is, defining good and bad, winning and losing, allies and ad-

versaries, etc. Structural features of organization are formal, inflexible (except under special conditions and procedures), created and maintained by documentation, and contingency-centered—that is, setting out responsibilities, rights, and rewards or punishments on which individual behavior or group action is contingent.

In day-to-day organizing, it isn’t possible to separate culture and structure. So while we create organizational structure that spells out the positions to be filled by the leaders, members, and staff 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.

Examples of culture and structure that develop early in the life of the organizing committee, directly affecting its weekly meetings, are procedures and understandings for the meetings themselves. From the outset, OC meetings, and the coming organization as well, are structured by the use of formal, written agendas, bylaws, and constitutions. These documents are “fixed”; they are permanent records that outline rights and responsibilities, requiring motions and votes to be changed, even if done casually. Most structure is introduced by the use of such “paper models”—for instance, sample bylaws circulated by organizers. Although formal adoption doesn’t normally happen until the founding meeting, the development of organizational structure is pushed along by reference to these models. To take one case, decisions about OC members’ roles and tasks are based on expectations about offices that will be filled by election once the organization is formally underway.

On the other hand, understandings about the “tone” of meetings are an informal matter, part of the culture. The culture evolves in conversation and is in flux. For instance, during the organizing drive, before the first OC, I talk with several people whom I’ve identified as potential leaders, including the prospective chair and co-chair. I talk with them about the need to have meetings that are both effi-

cient and fun. Through conversations I make this point with many people. During prep sessions with leaders before the neighborhood-wide, founding meeting, I personally model this behavior—acting efficient in dealing with business but in a light-handed way that allows for having a good time—and I do the same in the first OC meeting, insofar as there are natural opportunities.

To sum up, the structural aspects of organizations are those which, while introduced in organizing committees and other ad hoc bodies, are at some point made “official.” The structure permanently sets the way the organization is supposed to operate, for what purposes, and how. It’s the formal system of expectations, with their associated rewards and punishments, the fixed contingencies for behavior and action. Its counterpart is organizational culture, ideological definitions—of people, events, objects, circumstances, facts, and information; of how things are to be done, by whom, and to what end; and so on—when these are not formalized.

As organizers we know that the OC is where leaders and issues are cultivated. But we should also treat the OC as a series of opportunities for organizing the culture and structure that will underpin the long-range future of a neighborhood community and its organization.

### *Laying the Groundwork*

The pivotal point in the life of an organizing committee is the organizer’s choice of roles and tasks for its members. It’s this early step in creating culture and structure that sets the stage for the values, goals, and action style of the organization during its life.

Much of what I do in initial doorknocking is set expectations, particularly about roles. I introduce the idea of myself as coach, emphasizing that they will own, operate, and control the organization from the outset. These expectations include my view that, while many roles and decisions are reserved exclusively to members or leaders, ideally all of what the organizer knows and does is shared or transferred to them. This idea has a number of immediate practical applications. For example, I ask one member on each street to be a block captain and make reminder calls for the first meeting; and as soon as possible I find someone to “coordinate” the captains.

The first OC meeting comes in the second or third week of the organizing drive, about the time 20 members have been signed up. While it’s easy to increase the number at that first meeting by asking new members to bring neighbors, I’ve found that OC meetings with more than 15 or 20 are unwieldy, inefficient for working out details. Fewer than 10 on the OC results in too much work for each person, and it’s inadequate as a leadership base.

There are criteria for picking people to play key OC roles, but I haven’t found a formula. I depend a lot on intuition about the available candidates. I also look for good values, ability to hear and talk, willingness to work, learn, and take risks, sensitivity to power and the political interests, a sense of humor, awareness of local problems and conditions, commitment to social, political, and economic change, and, most importantly, relationships with neighbors. While I’m not especially concerned about ideological perspectives, believing that well-developed organizational culture and structure are great equalizers, I avoid heavy-duty ideologues, along with others who have seemingly dangerous or destructive agendas that they might want to play out through the organization.

While regular turnover in OC membership from meeting to meeting is expected, with many people coming only once or twice, there should be a membership core that makes up about half of the committee. Undoubtedly the most important factors in achieving this continuity are the relevance of issues on the agenda and the organizer’s investment in making callbacks to individual members. The return visits are to take care of immediate organizational business—giving information, briefing, getting referrals, etc.—but over the long haul they serve to build a working relationship between the member and the organizer, a mutual discovery and growing confidence in one another’s trustworthiness and competence.

While each OC meeting agenda has a number of items, each also has one main purpose; and these purposes together are the “critical path” to a successful first neighborhood-wide meeting and follow-up action.

The purposes of the OC meetings are closely linked from one week to the next: first week, talking about and listing neighborhood problems; second week, deciding what research is needed to produce a specific statement about selected problems, corresponding demands, and possible targets; third week, based on research results, deciding on the first issue(s) to recommend for action and roughing out an action plan to present at the founding meeting; fourth week, outlining an agenda for the founding meeting, specifying pre-meeting and meeting tasks and roles, and naming individuals to fill them; and fifth week, role-playing to prepare for the founding meeting.

### *Preparation for the First OC*

The pre-meeting and meeting business of the first OC necessitates preparing members for a number of activities and roles, including: turn-out phone-calling; coordination of phone-callers; drafting an “organizing letter”—announcing the formation of the neighborhood organization and its founding meeting—that later in the drive will be sent to every household in the neighborhood; hosting the

meeting; chairing the meeting, including agenda layout, introductions, and meeting control; taking minutes; talking about “Why Are We Here?”; talking about “What’s CAL?”; moderating the discussion of neighborhood conditions and problems; talking about membership and budget; and the responsibilities of informal leadership.

The incipient culture and structure of the organization flow from a series of in-person callbacks to new members, to help them prepare for the OC meetings. In these first get-togethers I put several definitions into the budding culture. I define leaders as people who, while having a number of unique attributes, don’t usurp the rights of members by making decisions for them. I define leadership, generally, as a shared process—“leadership depth”—fostered by moving as many people as possible, very quickly, into roles and positions of responsibility. It also means rotating roles to allow a number of members to try themselves as leaders and allow others to appraise their performances. As already mentioned, successful meetings are defined in the incipient culture as both efficient and fun. And so on.

At the start of culture-building, definitions of the organizer’s role create a long-lasting bias about staff influence. The goal is organizational culture and structure that, although permanently including professional staff, don’t represent any kind of undesirable dependency for day-to-day success. In my view, 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,” helping to resolve internal conflicts. But when the “team” is “on the field,” it elects its own “captains” as leaders and “plays its own game”—and the coach is present but on the “sideline.”

My definition of the organizer’s role is both enabling and constraining. Sometimes my position on a question is presented to members or leaders as a certainty, for instance on the necessity for making decisions democratically or having preparation meetings before actions. I press these requirements in the strongest possible way if there’s resistance, even to the point of talking down or otherwise overriding a leader who insistently opposes making the investment necessary to get a membership mandate or prepare for action. Other matters, however, such as picking particular issues or tactics (once the criteria and strategic situation are clear) are the business of members.

I begin defining these and other role distinctions during my initial doorknocking and reinforce them later with members when planning OC meetings. I continue promoting and spreading these definitions of roles, upgrading them as necessary, throughout my work with the organization.

Much of the preparation for the first OC, the OC meetings that will follow, and ultimately the founding meeting, is geared to answer three unasked questions that will be in the minds of those who attend the meetings before joining. Many if not all of the non-members, and probably a majority of the members as well, will be wondering whether the other people in the room—staff and members—are trustworthy, competent, and committed. They’ll be asking themselves, are these the kind of people I want to join up with? Are they honest? Can they succeed at what they say they want to do? Will they stick? Most of those who are thinking these questions won’t ask them openly, to avoid conflict or embarrassment. But if in the course of the meeting they don’t get adequate answers, likely as not they’ll be lost to the organization, at least for the time being. Thus, these unasked questions are a major focus of prepping for the OC meetings.

### *Chairing*

Prepping the chair for the first OC goes on in two or three callbacks, over several days. In the first callback I present the idea and give the person both a general picture of what the job entails and assurance of my support throughout the process. The contact, first at the door, might go like this:

*ben Asher:* Hi, Mrs. White. How are you doing?

*White:* Just fine. What’s up?

*ben Asher:* I’d like to talk with you for a couple of minutes about the organization.

*White:* Sure, come in.

*ben Asher:* (Sitting in the living room.) When you joined CAL last week and we were talking, I mentioned that in a few days we would get things started by forming an organizing committee to lay the groundwork for the organization. I came by today to ask if you would chair the first meeting of the committee—but before you decide, let me give you a picture of what’s involved.

With that introduction I would then move on to explain the idea of rotating leadership positions early-on and generally describe what chairing requires and how I would support her in the job. Once she accepted, I would suggest another visit, within a day or two, to work out an agenda. This second callback would emphasize not only agenda planning but the principles of good chairing. Following that, the third callback would deal mostly with role-playing the meeting.

My preparation of the chair begins, then, with the layout of the agenda for the meeting. I work up a rough agenda, and together with the chair, refine

it, making additions, deletions, and other changes. In our second prep session together we cover: introductions—asking people to give both their name and street; verbal “sign-posting” of the meeting as it goes along, so there’s a shared sense of direction and accomplishment; “shifting gears”—ensuring smooth transitions, such as moving from the discussion of problems to talk about how members can help make the organizing drive a success by phone-calling and doorknocking; asking for a motion to form the OC; getting agreement on the time, date, and place for the next meeting; and proposing the agenda for the second meeting (as discussed earlier with the organizer).

The role-playing preparation lays out a number of possible problems and how they might be managed. My approach is to ask the chair, “how would you want to deal with that?”—say a situation where someone asks why it’s necessary to have an “outside” organization in the neighborhood. If the person can’t come up with an effective answer, I’ll suggest one or more.

To achieve a successful meeting it’s necessary for the chair to have absolute but not rigid control, and to show warmth and humor when being very directive. The chair must also be able to handle unexpected and potentially difficult situations. Both of these points are addressed by the organizer’s describing some of the players who are likely to be at the meeting, and by briefly role-playing how they can be dealt with.

The tendency of new chairpersons to personally rebut critics who become insistently vocal in meetings should be redirected by the role-playing, with the chair learning to turn questions back to others in the room. This is done with responses such as, “How do other people feel about Mr. Digg’s point?” If the chair becomes an advocate, attempting to answer or stop criticism, the result will be to lose credibility as a neutral moderator, to cut others out of explaining the organization and owning that explanation, and to promote resentment for abusing the power of the chair. (Of course, the practice of a chair turning hostile or difficult questions back to others in the room only works well if there are other, informal leaders prepared to speak up.)

The role-playing should also include talk by the organizer to blunt the natural inclination of many new leaders to define organizational situations in “we-they” terms, doing things like *personally* welcoming people to meetings or thanking them for taking on or finishing a job—as if the member acted to please the leader, rather than everyone working together for their common interests.

Finally, the chair should be prepped to avoid exhortation—all variations of “you really oughta wanna”—as a method of gaining interest and participation. The alternative to berating people for

not satisfying our expectations, a practice that only builds resentment, is to pull them into finding solutions. So instead of saying, “you people have to come to more meetings if this organization is going to succeed,” the leader asks, “how can we get more people to come and participate in our meetings?”

### *“Why are We Here?”*

This part of the first OC agenda, like several others, deals with one of those previously mentioned unasked questions. It usually comes after introductions. Its essential elements are that the neighborhood has unresolved problems and has been deteriorating; that whatever the problems or solutions, there’s a need for organization—neighbors will have to work together; and that CAL has a track record in winning improvements.

I usually begin the prep session by asking about the person’s main reasons for joining the organization; then we proceed to build the presentation from there. Many respond with stories about neighborhood problems, how things were better years ago, and about frustration in trying to make or get improvements. Brief talk is usually enough to help the person shape a short presentation—one to three minutes—that hits the highlights of the presenter’s experience.

It’s important to prep both the chair and the person making the “Why Are We Here?” presentation to avoid prematurely launching into a detailed discussion of neighborhood problems. At the beginning of the first meeting there’s a great deal of energy to do that. (Informal leaders, ready to push for “getting back to the main business,” also help to keep the meeting on track.)

The role-playing for this presentation, to be repeated for other parts of the agenda, includes preparing the person to deal with those in the meeting who personalize problems and blame individuals for what’s wrong in the neighborhood. It’s not uncommon that, in reply to the question “What are the problems in our neighborhood?” someone answers, “It’s that Smith family, those kids—if we could only get rid of them everything would be great here!” Of course, the preparation should note that there are many kids in the neighborhood who get into trouble, that unemployment and lack of recreation are strong contributing factors, and that “blaming the victims” is neither fair nor useful for a neighborhood organization.

### *“What’s CAL?”*

This is one of the more difficult presentations at the first meeting because the presenter is in the awkward position of talking about the organization while having only a relatively recent and shallow understanding of it.

My approach to the first prep session is to bring some organizational literature. After asking if the person is willing to do the presentation, and

making a short explanation of what's involved, I get the presenter's viewpoint on CAL (or whatever the name of the organization) with a question like, "How do you see CAL?"—asking the person to make a list of the points mentioned. I suggest that if it seems useful, the presenter may also want to review the organization's literature, and then "decide on maybe five to ten points that you would want someone else to mention in explaining the organization to you."

I offer as a theme for the presentation, the idea that the organization is "just us, just the people in the neighborhood working together on our common problems—the statewide CAL organization won't ride in here like the 7th Cavalry to save us—but we're linked to people like ourselves in other neighborhoods throughout the city, the state, and the country."

Before ending the first prep session I also suggest that the presentation should make some mention of the organization's major wins, the key elements of structure, and the main funding sources; and that it should be kept relatively simple, without a lot of detail, lasting no more than five minutes. It should end with an invitation for questions that can lead to longer explanations and discussion if there's interest.

The second session is for reviewing the presentation, with some shaping and sharpening if necessary, and for role-playing responses to people in the meeting who are opposed to the organization. The presenter (and all other formal and informal leaders) should be prepared for block club leaders, politicians, old-timers who resent "outsiders," and a variety of other critics and crazies who may be at the OC meeting. Special attention should be given to answering comments about the necessity for dues and what happens to the money, the presence of an outside organizer, the organization's direct action style, and solving neighborhood problems by relying on the personal connections of residents with politicians and bureaucrats at city hall.

#### *"Membership/Budget"*

After the meeting has covered the neighborhood's problems, the need for organization, and the characteristics of the proposed organization, and has voted to form an organization, it moves on to a presentation on membership and budget.

The person who is asked to do this agenda item has a two-fold job: to pitch membership, with annual dues, and to explain the big budget items. The role requires excitement and conviction about the organization and a grasp of numbers. Often the person who takes this role becomes either the membership whip or the treasurer.

The presentation has several essential points: "our strength is in our numbers"—the organization needs many members to win victories; membership

is \$16 a year; the main budget items are, on the income side, membership dues and canvassing, and on the expense side, staff salaries; the main tasks for staff organizers are legwork, doorknocking, research, and helping members prepare for meetings and actions; and, for people who are not yet members of the organization, "Now's the time to join!"

It's helpful to have printed literature, such as budget breakdowns and income-expense pie charts, to supplement the presentation.

The prep session is to help the new member develop the minimal skills necessary to competently moderate a discussion of problems that leads not to talk of solution strategies and action plans but to research requirements for picking an issue. The main goal for the first OC is to come up with a list of neighborhood problems. The idea is to draw out as many people as possible to talk about conditions in the neighborhood that are of concern to them. In this discussion, not only does a list of conditions get produced, but individuals find that they are not alone in their concerns and that others are also ready for action on problems they have in common.

In my OC meetings the discussion of problems usually begins with my talking about the differences between problems and issues, and the need for the organization to consciously decide to make issues out of certain problems. My explanation is that, in contrast to statements of problems that describe the injuries and injustices that people suffer from particular conditions, issue statements (1) propose goals that are in contention, that is, lead to conflict, (2) specify, implicitly or explicitly, a solution strategy, (3) identify targets that can meet demands, and (4) shake out allies, adversaries, and third parties. The distinction between problem and issue statements is important because it's the basis for establishing the need to do research before deciding to make an issue out of a problem.

After my own talk about transforming problems into issues, ideally the discussion moderator lays out the basic criteria for picking an issue. Although the agenda of the first OC doesn't include selecting an issue, knowing the criteria helps limit the list of problems to those that are at least potential issues, thus avoiding "hunger in the Third World" and "abuses of the Supreme Court" in the list of neighborhood problems. So the prep session with the discussion moderator should specify the criteria for preferred early issues. The most important points are that they should be non-divisive, be relatively easy to win, affect many people in the neighborhood, and produce visible results when won.

The main role-play in the prep session is to keep the first meeting's discussion off solution strategies and action plans. It's inevitable that no sooner than two or three problems are mentioned,

someone will jump up with, “I know Councilman Fnork personally and I can go in and talk to him about this first thing tomorrow morning.” If these proposals are not dealt with adequately by others, the moderator’s general response should be to note the importance of building the membership during the organizing drive, so that the organization is strong when it takes action, and the need for initially reviewing the neighborhood’s problems, doing enough research so the membership can intelligently select the “best” problem to make into an issue.

When talk about problems has been fairly well played out, with an extensive list produced, the moderator makes the transition to the next agenda item—the ongoing organizing drive—by reinforcing the point that the success of the organization requires, more than anything else, strength in numbers.

### *Hosting*

There are several things to keep in mind when asking someone to host the first or second OC meeting. It’s not just a matter of furnishing a meeting place. In many neighborhoods the organizing drive is building not only an organization but a community as well.

Certainly there are questions that relate only to the physical location and facilities. Is the host’s home well located to encourage turnout? Meetings in homes that are on dark streets, on streets at the edge of the neighborhood, or near crime “hot spots,” such as gang hangouts, are obviously less than ideal. Is the living room of the home large enough, not too cluttered with furniture, and adequately heated or cooled for the season? Is the furniture arranged to allow for eye contact by everyone?

But the most important preparation deals with the “hosting” itself, not the location or building. Ideally, the host or hostess is someone who can comfortably greet people and put them at ease. The prep session begins with the idea that, especially at the first meeting, we want to avoid having people arrive early and sit alone, isolated, in a silent room. The antidote is to have the host or hostess make introductions and get conversations started with small talk that, while not overly serious, centers on the neighborhood. Arrivals are thus individually greeted and “plugged in”:

*Hostess:* (Answering the door.) Hi, I’m Alice Williams—I live here.

*Neighbor:* Hello, I’m Joe Bennington.

*Hostess:* Glad to meet you. What street are you from?

*Neighbor:* I’m on Orchard, 1212.

*Hostess:* Oh, yes, I was just talking with Mrs. Johnson about the overgrown trees on Orchard. Do you know her?

I ask hosts to take responsibility for having nametags and a marker pen, so that introductions are less likely to be glossed over. I also ask them to serve refreshments, the cost to be reimbursed by the organization or by an informal collection when the meeting is over. It’s important to make sure that the cookies, punch, and coffee aren’t served until the end of the meeting, to allow time for getting acquainted and informal talk.

Small but important details to cover with hosts include making sure the porch light is on and the street number visible (or a large sign with the organization’s name or logo posted), making sure that each person completes the sign-in sheet on arrival, and posting “no smoking” signs.

### *Meetings*

I usually distribute flyers to members for OC meetings, for several reasons. First, it’s a convenient way to “explain” a return visit when I don’t have any other business to cover. Second, it introduces the idea of flyering for meetings in anticipation of asking OC members to flyer for the founding meeting. And third, it’s a way I can begin to mold and transmit the organization’s cultural definitions of issues and action. The flyers are handed out one or two days ahead of the meeting, in the late afternoon or early evening before regular doorknocking, giving me a chance to make brief but important personal contact with many of the OC members.

A typical agenda for the first OC meeting might be:

1. Introductions (Member-Chair)
2. “Why Are We Here?” (Member)
3. “What’s CAL?” (Member)
4. Motion & Vote to Form an Organizing Committee (Member)
5. Membership & Budget (Member)
6. Discussion of Conditions, Problems & Issues
  - Making an issue out of a problem and criteria for picking an issue (Organizer)
  - Listing and discussion of problems (Member-Moderator)
7. The Organizing Drive (Organizer)
  - Reports from phone-callers (Member-Coordinator)
  - Signing up for doorknocking, phone-calling, and flyering (Member-Coordinator)
  - Approving and signing the organizing letter (Member)

8. Next Week's OC Agenda (Member-Chair)
  - A priority list of problems
  - Deciding which problem(s) to research
  - Dividing up research jobs
9. Day, Time, and Place of Next Meeting (Member-Chair)
10. Adjournment
  - Refreshments

One of the most useful informal organizer gestures in early OC meetings is to ensure that there's an explicit assignment of responsibilities and a process of accountability for their completion. This needs to be done in an open and direct way. Names of individuals who volunteer or are nominated by others to do a job are visibly listed on butcher paper or a marker board when assignments are made; and later, when the jobs should be done, each person is openly held accountable—asked simply if in fact the work was finished. For those who haven't taken care of business, no other sanction is necessary. The embarrassment of having their covers pulled in a meeting is usually enough to make the point.

Once this process has been modeled, it can be quickly passed on to members. The phone-calling coordinator, for example, can do it by asking the block captains to report on their calling—how many people were called and their yes/no/maybe responses.

The dynamics of meetings are such that boredom can be minimized by the choice and arrangement of agenda items and the extent to which discussion is not dominated by a single individual (usually claiming some kind of expertise) but shared by many of those present. In a well-chaired meeting the majority participate actively in the discussion. The trick in this magic is for the chair to personalize questions, that is, not to pose them in a non-directive way to the group, but from time to time—when it feels appropriate and comfortable—to go around the room, asking individuals by name for opinions or ideas on the subject being discussed.

In terms of agenda items, preventing boredom begins with awareness of the three most common types of organizational business—internal maintenance (budgeting, planning, etc.), projects (fundraisers, parties, etc.), and actions with decision-makers. In general, the first tends to rapidly produce boredom, except when unusual controversy exists, the second generates a sense of accomplishment and community, and the third offers the excitement of winning a practical victory.

A common error for new organizers—and another source of boredom in OC meetings—results from their anxiety about conflict on issues or ten-

sion between individuals. They try to suppress discussion on hot issues or to divert individuals who are likely to be disruptive. In fact, if the chair maintains control, that is, doesn't allow any one person to talk-down everyone else, and if there are other, informal leaders in the room who can counter destructive players or perspectives, conflict has a tonic effect. It provides not only stimulation but a chance for the group to meet and beat a "common enemy."

### *Preparing for the Founding Meeting*

The last OC meetings mostly involve getting ready for the founding, neighborhood-wide meeting. By the fourth OC meeting, the committee should have done its research, picked a first issue, and outlined an action plan to propose at the founding meeting.

The main purposes of the fourth meeting, then, are to agree on the agenda for the founding meeting, to plan the jobs that have to be done, and to decide who will do them. The fifth and final OC meeting is the role-playing rehearsal for the founding meeting.

The agenda for the fourth OC meeting might look like the following:

1. Call to Order
2. Agenda for Neighborhood-Wide Meeting

## A G E N D A

- I. CALL TO ORDER
- II. BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION OF THE OC
- III. WHY ARE WE HERE?
- IV. WHAT'S CAL?
- V. MOTION & VOTE TO FORM A CAL ACTION TEAM
- VI. OPEN DISCUSSION OF NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS
- VII. RECOMMENDED FIRST ISSUE & ACTION BY THE OC
  - What We Want and Who We're Going to See to Get It
  - Time, Date, and Place of the Action
  - Sign-up and Scheduling of Planning Meeting
- VIII. MEMBERSHIP & BUDGET
- IX. ELECTION OF TEMPORARY OFFICERS (3-MONTH TERM)
  - Slate of Nominees from the OC
  - Nominations from the Floor
- X. ADJOURNMENT

## REFRESHMENTS

3. Jobs to be Done Before and at Neighborhood-Wide Meeting
  - Chair
  - Co-chair
  - Secretary (minutes)
  - “Why Are We Here?”
  - “What’s CAL?”
  - Motion to form a CAL Action Team
  - Report and motion on recommended issue and action
  - Membership/budget presentation
  - Presentation of election slate and motion to accept
  - Refreshments
  - Greeters/membership recruiters
  - Flyering/phoning
4. Nominations for Slate of Temporary Officers
5. Next Week’s OC Agenda
6. Day, Time, and Place of Next OC
7. Adjournment

### *Meeting Follow-Up*

Throughout the drive the organizer does two kinds of follow-up after each OC meeting. There are the more or less mechanical things that have to be done, such as making reminder calls for subcommittee meetings, getting information to members who missed the meeting, seeing people who haven’t joined yet, and confirming meeting places. The more critical follow-up, however, involves direct commerce with leaders and others who are taking leading roles. This means reviewing with them the strengths and weaknesses of the meeting

in general and their own and others’ performances in particular.

There’s a fine line in these talks, in which positive reinforcement and critical evaluation are balanced. My approach to this delicate act has several facets. In my early contacts with members and leaders I build into the culture (by frequent talk) the idea that the only problem the organization can’t deal with is the one nobody will talk about—it’s not only okay but inevitable that everyone in the organization will make mistakes, but what’s not okay is to repeat them over and over again. I replay these ideas in post-OC meetings with those who had leading roles. I ask members to describe the strengths and weaknesses of their performances. If it seems that a person has some insight into how to improve in the future, I ask for ideas on that; but if that sophistication isn’t apparent, I take up the subject myself.

The success of the organizing committee and, ultimately, the organization itself, depends very much on the organizer’s understanding of culture and structure, and on an ability to orchestrate contingencies and ideologies for their development. These in turn depend on our relationships with members and leaders. So that withal it’s a lack of relationship, an indifference or incapacity marked by an absence of feeling—respect, affection, commitment, etc.—that dooms the work of any organizer. Thus the most essential ingredient of an organizing drive and its OC meetings is not a series of “techniques,” although those are absolutely necessary, but finally a quality and intensity of knowing and understanding between the organizer and people in the organization.

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