

enable workers to come together to act collectively against the status quo to get those needs met.

Conclusion

A material interest in class power alone is not enough to effectively propel workers against capital. In actual workplaces, our material interests in higher wages are inseparable from our social interests in healthy relationships. Making gains in one is often dependent on securing gains in the other. Those I trust will listen to me are the ones I want to be around, who I will march into battle with when the bugle sounds.

*The post on my blog titled *An Introduction to 1-on-1 Organizing Conversations* offers a specific method for how to talk with coworkers about organizing that pairs well with the pieces on trust in this pamphlet. Visit that post here:



Manipulation and Trust in Organizing

For people new to organizing it can feel like it's about tricking people or manipulating them or guiding them to the correct place. People who shy away from organizing because of this have a healthy response to perceived manipulation. However, I think organizing that is sincere and empowering isn't about manipulation at all and is just the opposite.

The reason people often say that organizing feels manipulative is that you have a goal in your interactions with other people. Whether your organizing is actually manipulative depends on what your goal is and how you pursue it. If your goal is to narrowly impose your ideas and practices on others, then your organizing is manipulative and domineering. If your goal is to open up space to discuss social problems, explore the effects those problems are having on your community, and imagine together what kinds of actions might fix those problems, then your organizing can be empowering. Learning to identify and navigate between empowerment and manipulation in organizing is essential and will determine whether you see those around as pawns or partners in the fight for a better world.

This tension in organizing plays out in every interaction, every relationship, every coalition, every revolution. It's of such fundamental importance to organizing that I'm surprised and concerned it doesn't receive more attention. Even on my own blog, while I repeatedly note the need to respect people's agency, I think a superficial reading might give someone the wrong impression that organizing is just a game of getting people to do what you want them to do. This post is an opportunity for me to clear this up and tease out the subtleties of the ways that manipulation occurs and does not occur in grassroots organizing.

Explicit Manipulation in 1-on-1s

The first thing to recognize is that some individuals, organizations, and even entire traditions of organizing claim to be grassroots and about empowerment but use very manipulative practices. In the labor movement the most infamous recent example is the reputation of some UNITE HERE locals in the Southwest in the 2000s:

The most effective way to help someone to accept themselves is for you to accept them too. People know that those around them accept them when they feel listened to in the context of real relationships. When someone listens to you, it communicates to you that they value you, that they are interested in your well-being, and that they see you as deserving of attention and support.

Rogers invokes the idea of acceptance enabling change for the case of an individual making some personal change in their life with the help of therapy. **Relationship-based organizing** takes this same logic of acceptance as the enabler of change and applies it to workplace organizing.

Typically before a worker takes an active stance towards a problem at work, they will have to acknowledge that their stress is a result of economic necessity ("we won't keep this minute that such stress is a result of economic necessity"), "we won't keep this client if we don't finish the project by midnight", "there's no more money in the budget") or worker inadequacy ("the new people have to struggle through it, that's just how it is", "if you don't like it, you can leave", "maybe you're not a good fit for this").

But when workers come together to listen to each other about how the workplace really operates and to whose benefit, then they can connect how their similar experiences have resulted from shared conditions. They can realize how their negative feelings and self-perceptions at work aren't their fault. It's the boss's push for profit and control that is the source of the problems. When workers affirm their self-worth then they conclude that they are worthy of an emotionally healthy workplace environment. Such self-acceptance enables workers to redirect their feelings of helplessness to agitation at external forces that are responsible for their stress.

Furthermore, when listening is used to encourage self-acceptance inside workers, that also builds trust between workers. Just as self-acceptance leads workers to be able to explore and state their needs, so does trust

until much later. After the usual small talk, I was asked deeper questions until I-on-1, and I was a little caught off guard but didn't really know why I-on-1 was conducted differently than how I learned to do it. After going to a couple member meetings someone from the core committee of OHMN was assigned to meet up with me for a I-on-1.

In 2013 I was briefly in a group called "Occupy Homes Minnesota" (OHMN) that had broken off from the main Occupy MN grouping and eventually became a non-profit paid staff that did anti-eviction work. The staff were close with others in the local non-profit activist scene and encouraged active participants and board members to attend nationally renowned organizing trainings in Chicago. These trainings laid the foundation for what came to be expected of both staff and active members in the group.

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Over a dozen times in the course of a year, Arlen saw meetings end with the organizer breaking into tears, admitting their "mistake" or a product of fear, a lack of experience, a lack of commitment to the practice being used in other locals or former staffers who attest to the practice being used in other locals out west. While organizations are rarely that brash in institutionalizing manipulation, it's common enough in all kinds of activist groups.

The information gathered on these sheets was deeply personal and political and was often used in ugly ways:

But we saw upper-level organizers use this information to "push" staff or members when they were uncomforable with performing tasks, accepting orders, or making personal sacrifices.

This practice, known as pink sheeting, "finding your story," or "completing a motivation sheet" was a prerequisite for involvement in union activity. It was also supposed to build relationships between lead organizers and their subordinates.

Rather than encouraging organizers to themselves build dense networks of trusting relationships with their coworkers, many theories of “natural” or “social” leaders tell you to just win over the more popular coworkers who will then pull their followers along for this or that union action.

When working conditions are bad and opportunities for action present themselves, such superficial union methods can sometimes work in building worker unity towards action in the short-term. But that unity will often crumble in the aftermath of failed actions or half-won demands, when grievances are more local and personal, and when organizing runs into more determined resistance from the bosses. To really build lasting power in the workplace and in the labor movement, it will have to be based on the care, trust, and solidarity that organizers bring to their relationships with their coworkers.

Acceptance as the Basis of Change

Skeptics would be right to point out that just being friendly with your coworkers is hardly the secret ingredient or silver bullet to all your union organizing problems. How this is all supposed to work can seem a bit unclear. How do healthy coworker relationships lead to militant union action and radical worker power?

Not all coworker relationships are the same. It's specifically the care, trust, and solidarity that can be built into coworker relationships through good listening that gives relationships their political potency. But how do those things then help people find the desire, motivation, and courage to take action?

One of the most quoted phrases in clinical psychology is from Carl Rogers: **“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”**

When people learn that their problem doesn't mean that they are inherently bad or wrong or broken, and rather it's their past and present conditions that are the cause of the problem, then they can accept themselves for who they are. Self-acceptance enables people to recognize that they are worthy

about my own interests in the group. Standard stuff really. But then she kept asking me further and more personal questions and asking what the root reason was for why I care about this stuff and I ended up revealing some very private things from earlier in my life. These were things I usually don't share except with close friends, and this person talking to me literally just met me and kept gently but firmly digging.

I had also just moved back to Minneapolis after living in LA for nine years and was eager to make new activist friends and felt kind of vulnerable. Despite feeling a little uneasy, I was also excited about the prospect of having a new activist buddy.

A week after that 1-on-1 the core member left the organization, never reached out to me, and I never spoke with her again. I was pretty thrown off. A brief check-in goodbye would have indicated a minimum degree of courtesy. Instead, I felt used, like that person wanted to get very personal information out of me for reasons other than the forming of a real connection.

I left OHMN. The group collapsed under the weight of its own tensions not long after, and a couple years later more than a dozen former members met up and debriefed all the bullshit we experienced at OHMN. What I experienced was not an isolated incident and in comparison, I got off easy. Others in the group who were around longer and were recruited into lower-level leadership roles had much worse stories of being gaslit, pressured to not ask any critical or curious questions, shamed in front of others during committee meetings, and even finally pushed out when they refused to go along with top-down directives from the two lead staff. Many of these manipulative practices were encouraged by the aforementioned Chicago trainings.

In addition to the individual-harm these practices cause, they also rot our social movements from the inside out. Anyone who's seen behaviors like these and wants to stay away has a well-functioning bullshit meter.

Organizational Structures that Produce Manipulation

The hierarchical nature of many of the structures in our social movements can also be a source of manipulation. Non-profits often want to claim a

Even for those methodologies that sincerely emphasize listening, often the conversation is posed as something you do in the build-up to a big action like a strike instead of something you do to put down deep relational roots in the workplace. The kind of organizing conversation recap-sheets that staff organizers use and that many union trainings advocate can be useful tools in certain circumstances, but that approach often neglects how to relate to coworkers in the day-to-day.

Non-Relationship Organizing

What's more, the healthy bonds between coworkers can start to unsettle the boss in your head and eventually replace it with the caring coworker in your head. When a coworker listens to and validates your feelings and needs, you begin to validate your own feelings and needs. Rather than work through your breaks or come into work sick, the caring coworker in your head says you deserve your breaks and can take the day off to recover from illness.

When the relationships between coworkers start to become stronger than the relationships that the boss has in the workplace, then the balance of power begins to shift. When the boss tries to make everyone work harder, workers can trust each other to push back collectively. When the boss tries to instill fear and obedience, workers can have each others' backs and decide for themselves what's fair in the workplace.

Some people are so focused on their activism that they don't see other people's boundaries or needs. I'll call them "pushers." Chalk it up to narcissism, a learned or inherent lack of social awareness, or any number

To make matters more contentious, manipulation practices don't solely emerge from self-conscious manipulation people and from top-down leadership structures. Just as common is the use of manipulation by well-meaning people who are unaware of the effects of their actions.

More Subtle Manipulation

Many other organizations on the left, often appealing to traditional Leninist ideas of the vanguard, adhere to the practice of not being public with their political convictions and aims. Their participation in organizations and movements is about getting others to go along with a program whose intentions are not revealed except to an inner circle. This replicates similar pressures from the non-proletarians where a veneer of popular participation and democracy needs to be reconciled with the private aims of the leaders who then use varying forms of manipulation and secrecy to maintain control.

But these hierarchies aren't confined to liberal non-profits either. Labor unions are funded by their members and so at least in principle have a more independent and democratic funding base, but many unions have formed rigid bureaucracies where top officials feel more invested in maintaining their own position and friendly relations with the company than in fighting for their members. Even in unions where member power is given at least some attention, top-down structures can lead to manipulative practices like pink-sheeting.

large following and mass base to give them a veneer of popular power, but because these non-profits are governed by executive directors and boards of directors who control access to funding sources from rich donors, they are rarely as democratic or invested in grassroots power as they claim. To reconcile their image of openness and democracy with their internal top-down structures, they often resort to manipulation and gaslighting to pressure people to go along with the program instead of giving people full access to information and decision-making.

people have to work harder or that a widespread grievance isn't that bad, then people believe the boss. If a coworker tries to speak up against this, the boss's influence among the workers will lead the other workers to ignore or shun the worker who speaks up. In this way, the boss is conditioning the social environment of the workplace so that workers do what is best for capital, which is to work harder and to follow orders.

The boss's control isn't just felt in the external relationships between those in the workplace, but workers often come to internalize this conditioning. They will make themselves work harder and will minimize any negative feelings they have about work and the boss in order to fit in and be seen as a "good" worker. This internal voice is often called the "boss in your head," and when the boss in the workplace is in control, each worker has a powerful boss in their head.

Of course, not all bosses are mean and some do a good enough job coordinating work tasks and respecting people's boundaries. The point of a class analysis is not to claim that all bosses are mean or that you have to hate your boss at a personal level to be a good radical unionist. The point of a class analysis is to make clear that no matter the personalities or work styles of your bosses or your coworkers, there are structural features of the capitalist workplace that create separate sets of interests for bosses and workers. How these interests are shaped or pursued in any particular workplace will be unique, but as long as capitalist relations hold, there will be strong pressures on bosses to maintain control and to get as much work out of their subordinates as they can.

The Caring Coworker at Work and in Your Head

Relationship-based organizing aims to unravel the boss's power starting with the relationships themselves. As an organizer, your main task is to build worker power by building relationships with your coworkers that counteract the relationships the bosses have.

The main tool you have to do this is listening. The basic idea is using listening as a way to support, validate, and encourage your coworkers to explore how they feel about work and what it would take to make things better.

of possible causes, but for whatever reason some people just don't know when they're pushing people out of their comfort zone in a bad way or pressuring them beyond what is respectful. I've seen this tendency in a few men especially who are super-committed to the movement and who take up a lot of space. The seriousness and commitment of pushers lets some people excuse their behavior as being passionate or reflective of "real" radical politics, but in the end it always results in people feeling invalidated, violated, or put at risk from being pressured to do things they don't think are safe.

It's important to call this what it is, which is manipulation, and to not let it be normalized in organizing spaces. I've been in spaces where we've had to address people like this. While it's taken a lot of energy in the short-term it's always led to a more positive culture in the long-term.

Organizing of any kind that challenges the status quo is going to make everyone involved uncomfortable at least some of the time. As an organizer, you have to know when it's okay and helpful to lean into discomfort and when it's dangerous and manipulative to lean into discomfort.

Bad discomfort arises when people feel pressured to do or agree to something that they are afraid of. If a coworker says they're afraid to walk a picket line because they're afraid of getting fired and not being able to provide for their family, a bad discomfort arises when impatient organizers minimize their concerns and rely on external pressure to get them to join the action. For example, "Your family's not gonna get fed on your current wages anyway," "How do you think your coworkers will feel when they hear you're not gonna be on the line?" "Do you think avoiding these problems is going to make your life any better?"

Good discomfort arises from people being empowered to access internal resources to think about their problems in new ways, to challenge their fears, and to explore new ways to stand up for themselves and their communities. In simplified terms, good discomfort is vulnerability and bad discomfort is shame.

When the boss has control of the workplace, the boss has control over the network of relationships in the workplace. That means when the boss says

The Boss at Work and in Your Head

This piece shows how listening can alter the social and psychological reality of the workplace and can empower workers to gain the self-confidence to take action.

Finally I figured it out I have some experience—such as seeing someone demonstrate outstanding listening or having an interaction with someone where I regretted not listening better—where I discover I still have a lot further to go.

My first lesson in good listening was just noticing that some of my friends were good at listening to me. Being listened to made me feel seen and whole, and that was something I wanted to give back to my friends.

I entered adulthood as a bad listener. I wasn't the kind of person who would talk too much so as to edge other people out of talking, and I listened plenty and asked people questions to evoke their thoughts. But for me the quality, not the quantity, of my listening was what was bad. I didn't know good listening was a thing, so I just assumed that all listening was more or less the same.

Everything that is democratic, caring, and collaborative in human relationships is created through listening. And yet, good listening is not easy. Good listening can appear insincere, unique to each personality, and situation-dependent, all of which make it hard to analyze and strategize about in a way that organizers might find helpful.

Self-Acceptance in Organizing

If you have a relationship with a coworker you might alternate many times between leaning into good discomfort and then backing off when bad

own fears in the moment.

I've gotten better at distinguishing between good and bad discomfort, but I also struggle with how to lean into the good discomfort when it arises. I tend to want to run away from emotionally vulnerable conversations, especially with people I don't know as well. But I've learned that this impulsive to run away is my own fear of other people's fears, my fear of navigating emotionally challenging moments with others. With intention and practice I've been getting better at respecting this discomfort and appreciating the challenges it presents, my fear of running away is my own fear of other people's fears.

When discomfort arises in organizing conversations, it's important to make the best decision for them to do what they want them to do. Emotional gardens in order to get them to do what they want them to do. Attitude towards others' discomfort, bulletproofing over people's complex from, organizers can mistakenly take an "ends-justifies-the-means" challenge. Without careful consideration of where discomfort is coming conversations for the first time, making these finer distinctions can be a challenge. Espically newer organizers who are trying to have organizing sometimes organizers unintentionally confuse these kinds of discomfort.

As always, the first step is to validate people's fears and then to give them an invitation to want to explore those fears and not run away from them. Perhaps line or not, and expressing a fear isn't a straight-up "no" but rather the conversation. Maybe the coworker feels torn about whether to join the organizer can pick up on this and provide a path through which to continue they want to share or explore. Even though it's uncomfortable, a skillful coworker reveals a fear, that can be an indication that maybe there's more expresses fear but won't pick up and leave the first time a coworker

Expressing curiosity takes the form of asking open-ended questions, like "Interesting, what lead you to see things that way?" Using "I" statements and talking about my own experience lets me share my own thoughts about an issue that can express disagreement but without the other person feeling directly attacked, like "I came to think this because in my experience ..." People are most willing to reconsider their views when they feel respected and see the relationship as a trusting space to explore new ideas. Practicing these skills on lower-stakes issues and with people you are more comfortable talking to can prepare you for more prickly organizing situations.

When I hold this tension of disagreement successfully, in the long term most of my conversations with fellow workers move towards finding common interests and coming to a shared understanding of solutions to workplace problems. Even when a coworker and I maintain our disagreement, we both learned something and set ourselves up for further engagement.

Recently in my organizing I was asking coworkers if they would take a higher-risk action around a complex set of issues. There were a dozen coworkers I was supposed to talk to over the course of a couple weeks, and honestly these conversations didn't really feel comfortable to me til I got to the third or fourth one. I spent a lot of time thinking through what questions to ask and how to frame things so people felt comfortable saying no, but even then it took me a few tries to really find the flow and balance I was looking for. Once I was in a groove, most coworkers said yes, a few said no.

The action was mostly successful. Even more important to me than the result of the action itself was the deeper understanding we came to of workplace issues and the further trust we built by talking things through. The next time these issues come up, we'll be even better prepared and stronger in our efforts to address them.

discomfort arises, all over the course of weeks or months or years. We've been taught to be afraid of authority since childhood and authorities have unaccountable power over large parts of our lives, so it's only natural that when given the chance to stand up against authority that we feel afraid. As organizers, we can walk this long path with others by building relationships, examining our fears, and discovering what we truly want and how to get it.

The Primary Source of Manipulation in Society: Capitalism and Oppression

All of this talk about manipulation in organizing shouldn't distract us from the underlying fact that capitalism and oppression is entirely built on manipulation and is its ultimate source. All the biggest corporations in the US now having an average pay disparity of 278:1 between their highest paid employee and their typical employee. The employees in most companies cluster heavily at the bottom of the payscale, and that lopsided ratio doesn't even take into account the stockholders who keep the profits of the company without doing any work at all. This is the norm. There's a lot of manipulation and violence required to make it seem normal, to make us feel like the crazy ones for questioning that norm.

That bosses and owners are given near unilateral authority to determine the working conditions in their companies, that people can be hired and fired for almost any reason at all, should not inspire us with feelings of trust towards them. Nice bosses exist, but they'd be just as nice if they didn't have such unilateral authority. Their personality doesn't come close to making up for the monstrous inequalities of wealth and power that we're forced to accept each day. That these inequalities are made more hideous according to arbitrary distinctions of race and gender should only harden our objections and resolve.

Many people accept the way things are. Many don't. It's the task of organizing to build up the forces of all that stands opposed to capitalism and oppression. Rather than mimic the guiding values of capitalism, like selfishness and manipulation, we can do better by calibrating our compasses towards solidarity and trust.

Trust in Organizing

Organizing is always full of subtle power dynamics even in the most democratic groups, and these dynamics are often most pronounced between long-time organizers in a group vs. the newer members. The long-time organizers are responsible for creating an environment of honesty and trust where newer members can gradually learn about the group and come to their own conclusions about their involvement. It's the task of the long-time organizers to constantly bring people along and show them how the org does things and how they can do those things too.

Some times new organizers are hesitant about using organizing techniques because they are shy about exercising power. Empowering others is surely a kind of power, and how to use that kind of power effectively and transparently largely describes the art of grassroots organizing. When done well, organizing as empowerment is the exact opposite of manipulation.

The central concept of radical grassroots organizing is that **no one has to be tricked or manipulated into fighting against oppressions and exploitation** because it's natural for people to want to stand up for themselves and their communities in the face of injustice. People can overcome their fears of fighting back when they feel in control of their choices and in community with others. Self-determination and community comes from building trust in oneself and others. Trust comes from people feeling heard, respected, and supported. This is what organizing as empowerment is about.

Agitation isn't about getting people mad to get them to do what you want but also to help them relate emotionally and politically to their conditions and to their coworkers. Bringing up many emotions including anger but also the bad. This can work place conditions. This includes both the good and the bad. This can bosses and the media and coming to an honest and accurate assessment of what they do. Rather, agitation done right gives people the space and support them to do. Agitation isn't about getting people mad to get them to do what you want but also to help them relate emotionally and politically to their conditions and to their coworkers.

As a long-time organizer friend reminded me recently, contrary to popular conceptions so that they are not presumptuous or patronizing. Other questions so that they are not presumptuous or patronizing. Other even when I disagree with the conclusion, and just trying to create an atmosphere of openness and supportiveness.

Even if they do say no, making them feel comfortable with their decision will increase their trust in me and will make it easier to talk through other issues in the future. In organizing at work especially, where I'm often talking with people I spend a lot of time around, all of the little extra efforts I make to help people feel respected in their decisions pays off. I will not win over every coworker on every issue, but I'll be there issue after issue to raise what's going on. I'll be there day after day, year after year to think through what my coworkers what we want collectively and how we plan to get it.

I talk a lot about care and trust in organizing, but it would be a huge mistake to interpret this to mean that we should never challenge coworkers I challenge coworkers from a place of trust and curiosity, and NOT I challenge coworkers from a place of blame or bailing way. It takes a certain degree of confidence to both be able to both retain my own opinion and to give someone else the space to freely form and express their own. The confidence comes partly from knowing the issue well enough that I can express my own opinion succinctly as well as tease out the reasons behind different positions. The confidence also comes from the self-assuredness of not seeing other people's disagreement as a personal attack on myself.

Disagreement invariably creates a social tension in these conversations, and it's a tension I can make space to hold. The key is to both not let the tension dissipate by running away from disagreement and to not let the views instead of defensive enables this tension to become generative.

and stockholders, because blaming coworkers has no place in grassroots organizing.

The second standard I hold myself to that has become central in my organizing is making people feel comfortable saying no or disagreeing with me. Letting people say no may seem counterproductive because it may seem to make my organizing more difficult. I stole the idea of giving people the space to say no from consent discourse and just plopped it into my thinking about organizing. This has actually made my organizing so much easier, smoother, and more effective.

For some coworkers with assertive personalities, who I know well, and with lots of experience on a particular issue I can often expect them to be up front with me. But for those who might be more reserved, new to an issue, or I don't know as well, I have to put extra effort into making sure they feel comfortable voicing their thoughts and making a decision exactly in line with what they want. Particularly because organizing against the boss is new to most people and kind of scary for people when they first think about it, it is absolutely essential that organizers know how to navigate these conversations in delicate ways when they need to.

So much organizing, by newbies and veterans alike, is shallow and predicated on trying to get another person to do something. Framed in those terms, organizing becomes transactional, individual, and often manipulative. The whole philosophy of relationship-based organizing that I developed with fellow organizers and write about on my blog is precisely an attempt to make organizing the opposite of shallow (i.e., relational, collective, and based in trust). I've certainly gotten better at this over the years, but I still catch myself falling into shallow organizing in little moments or interactions when I'm trying out something for the first time, or I'm tired, or I feel rushed.

The best antidote I have against shallowness in my own organizing is slowing down and preparing mentally ahead of time for conversations with coworkers. Before going into a conversation with a coworker about a specific issue, I think through what I'm going to say in my head with the intention of giving the other person the total freedom to say no thanks or to disagree with me. I'll come up with specific ways of phrasing key

New organizers are correct to wade slowly into this sea of power, gradually learning and gaining confidence in their skills before running out to where the water gets deep.

Conclusion

Manipulation in organizing has at its root a lack of belief in yourself and others. If you doubt your abilities and can't see a way to work with others to fight back for liberation while being open and honest, then you fall back on manipulation. If you don't think others are smart enough to grasp the nature of society's problems or how to fix them, then you have to tell them what to think and manipulate them into doing what you want. Trust in organizing is based in a real belief in people to be able to recognize and solve problems.

People aren't perfect, never have been, and never will be. Humanity is justified on its own terms, not in its impossible ideal. Yet organizing asks more of us than we currently are, not to invalidate and shrink us but to motivate and grow us. The proposition inherent in organizing is that there are versions of ourselves that are more powerful and good than we currently are.

Linking personal transformation to social transformation is only possible through struggle alongside others. Trust in organizing as the opposite of manipulation is what knits together healthy social relations into a liberating force and is the only way to get where we want to go. The trust created between two people in a conversation about immediate issues and how to fix them can be scaled up to the level of an organization can be scaled up to a social movement can be scaled up to society as a whole. In order to make social change that is deep and durable, we have to put our trust in trust itself.

Power that I have in a world of practical responsibility. The practical power that I have, organizers live in a world of practical responsibility. The practical power that I have that I have in a world of practical responsibility to use is to keep building relationships with coworkers based on care, trust, and solidarity. When I run up against obstacles in my organizing, I have the practical power to re-evaluate why my coworkers aren't involved or don't seem to care. I have the practical power to find new ways to relate and connect to them so that organizing can move forward. I can save the blame for the bosses

Most workers for most of their working lives have been immersed in the values of obedience to workplace authority. That's what it means to live under capitalism. When I start to prompt coworkers to think about their workplace differences differently, I'm often working against an entire lifetime of learned thought patterns. When I remind myself of this, I can be a little more patient with coworkers who I'm encountering with about problems on

At my best, I can get curious about why my coworkers aren't involved in addressing an issue. I can get to know them. I can build trust that might later result in mutual understanding that might result in a shared interest in addressing shared workplace problems.

The second corrosive effect of blaming coworkers is that it damages my relationships with them. When I blame my coworkers for not being involved I'm accusing them of being part of the problem. This will make my coworkers defensive and highly think that I don't know where they're coming from. They'll not want to be around me or talk to me, and all prospects of future organizing will be greatly diminished.

and get to the other side of it. Only then can I take a fresh look at the problem from an organizing perspective.

However, venting is totally natural and can be a useful way to let off steam and move through cycles of frustration without resorting to blame. It's important for me to NOT vent directly to the coworkers I am trying to organize with, as venting my frustration at them directly will only lead to them disengaging further. Having a friend or fellow organizer who I have a strong and trusting relationship with who I can vent to when I need to helps me express frustration in a safe way and helps me be heard. Letting off steam with a little venting allows me to move through the frustration

But blaming coworkers has two extremely corrosive effects on organizing. First, when I blame my coworkers it stunts my creative problem-solving and saps my motivation to keep trying. Instead of asking myself what I can do to help my coworkers get more involved, I absolve myself of responsibility and take the easy road by blaming other people. This makes me feel good in the moment but absolutely destroys any possibility of success in my organizing.

Regardless of the first standard, it's certainly tempting to blame my coworkers when they don't seem to care or want to get involved. Organizing is a ton of work and when it fails or moves at a snail's pace it can be the most frustrating thing in the world.

This might seem counterintuitive. If the point of organizing is for more coworkers to be involved in making things better, isn't it their fault if they don't get involved and things remain bad? Similarly, shouldn't it be finding more ways to get coworkers to say yes and agree rather than say no and disagree?

There are two standards that I hold myself to that have become absolutely central to everything I do in my union organizing. First, I never blame my coworkers for not being involved or not caring. Second, whenever I invite a coworker to get involved or to share their opinion, I want them to feel comfortable to decline or disagree.

Give Them Space to Say No