

*Since 1971, Radical Women has been reprinting and recommending this astute analysis of the qualities needed for movement leadership. James Forman (1928-2005) was a militant leader in the Black civil rights movement and is the author of **The Making of Black Revolutionaries** and other books.*

The Political Organizer is a Leader

by James Forman

SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), 1967

The acid test of effective leadership by political organizers is their willingness to submit their role for examination, evaluation and criticism. They must be willing to do this with the people with whom they are working and within the unit they represent. It is their responsibility to lead this discussion and to always insist that their role is up for constant evaluation. Naturally they must be willing to evaluate their own efforts, to admit mistakes, to correct them and move on, for there is work to be done.

There are three characteristics of a good organizer. These three characteristics or qualities or traits apply to those who consider themselves organizers in any field or arena, whether it is social work, political organizing, administration, or fund-raising.

1. They are creative. They are self-starters. They move with a plan, with long and short-range goals learned from collective discussion with their units. If any cats tell you they have nothing to do, that they are waiting direction, while they sit in a pile of dirt or see a dirty floor and do not get a broom right away, then these cats are not organizers. They are saying in fact: "I am lazy and I'm not really a good hustler of work."
2. They are pushers. They have a goal in mind. They must get from A to Z in X amount of time. It is impossible to get there on time unless they push themselves and push others who are working with them. Very important that they push themselves first of all, for they have no right to expect others will follow a phony lead. If they push themselves and work hard, then others will willingly follow. We know when the pusher is shucking and jiving. Slavery is almost dead within the United States.
3. They pay attention to details and follow through. Lack of follow-up is the graveyard of most ideas and plans. This death often flows from taking on too many jobs, inadequate planning or record keeping, and sometimes downright laziness.

There are seven steps political organizers must take if they are to be effective. Combined with the three general characteristics of a good organizer in any field, these seven steps herefore constitute ten basic steps in becoming a good political organizer.

1. They think they know, and yet, they may not know. The others may be right, for organizers must learn from the people with whom they work. Others can teach something and they must learn it. There is no place for a dogmatic position nor a belief that I, the organizer, am absolutely right: I must have the last word. This attitude may well lead to

the final word, but there will be few people around willing to listen.

2. Good organizers seek to understand the customs, the language, the history, the strong points and the weak points of the people with whom they work. Failing to do this, they weaken their own effectiveness. One of the tragedies of some middle-class people working in the South is that it takes them a long time to get accustomed to the ways of the people and by the time they do, they are ready to return home, sometimes full of romantic notions about the purity of the local folks and their beauty in the midst of poverty, disease, degradation, and death.

3. They assign work to people, to men and to women and to young people. They take the attitude: "I must move on and organize others, and if you really want to do this, you must take steps yourself. I can get you started, but if you ain't willing to work for your own liberation—then I must go!"

"Have skills, must travel.
No time for clinging vines.
Fertile fields I must find. "

4. Organizers must also concern themselves with their own survival and the survival of the unit with which they are working. They should first look for the necessary resources for survival in the area where they are working. There is a rule that no army is stronger than its supply routes. The first effort of the enemy is to attempt to destroy the supply lines. Dig Vietnam. If the resources are coming from the area in which one is working it becomes more and more difficult to cut them off, unless the work itself is destroyed.

5. They seize every opportunity to develop a sense of struggle in the people with whom they work. They must be alert and look around for weak points in the system and motivate small and large struggles. They know people grow and learn and develop from commitment and involvement. A spirit of defiance and fight does not arrive just from study. Action is key to change and mass mobilization will knock down all sorts of doors.

6. They must have a sense of timing. Pushing too fast when people are not ready for certain ideas will lead to negative reactions and the organizer will lose time. Yet, there are some issues which cannot wait, no matter what the plan might be. People must react since we do not live in a controlled vacuum or a sealed box. An awareness that positive action is better than none and will have positive consequences of which we might not know—this is fundamental to developing the social awareness and a sense of struggle in ourselves and the people with whom we work.

7. They must constantly improve their own intellectual development. They must take time to study, to read, to write, to rest. They must constantly evaluate their actions and the actions of others and discuss them collectively with their friends and fellow workers. We live in a rapidly changing world and the good organizer has to be kept abreast of world events. If organizers keep reading, studying, and writing about their experiences, the entire unit will grow and the organizers themselves will acquire skills that make them very mobile, able to move into many different kinds of situations an absolute must in our time.

*(Reprinted in the May 12, 1971 issue of **The Guardian** [New York]).*

A Note by Radical Women:

"AN ABSOLUTE MUST IN OUR TIME"

We would change Forman's sequence and elevate point No. 7 to point No. 1 because the paramount traits of the organizer/leader must be theoretical soundness and the capacity to project a valid analysis and meaningful development of the program. This *ideological* process precedes, interacts with, and tests the actual organizing activity itself.

A fundamental understanding of society, then, is the basis for leadership and the organizer's guide to action. This means that a scientific grasp of the *laws of capitalism* is primary; our most elementary survival problems cannot be solved for *all* within the framework of this system. So the organizer, in the final analysis, must be the representative of the most oppressed, oriented toward a course of action designed to change the private ownership of the means of production into social ownership—into socialism.

A serious organizer who stays with the struggle, studies revolution—the revolutionary movements of the past and the present—in order to learn from them and proceed to chart a realistic course to the future.

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