

# **Organizing: Lessons Learned**

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**A Few Things I Picked Up in Two Years as a Full-Time Field Organizer  
in the U.S. Youth Climate Movement**

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August 2009

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## Intro / Disclaimer

Hi, my name's Mattie and I'm from Columbus, Ohio. In the spirit of theory-action-reflection (aka “praxis”), I am writing this to share with other organizers in the youth climate movement and related fields some lessons learned in my 2-year stint as a field organizer and the Coordinator of the Ohio Student Environmental Coalition. This is especially for people who are newer to organizing and/or the youth climate movement, but should also stand as a learning and thinking piece for many others. Before we get into it, a couple things:

**I'm deliberately writing this more about organizing than campaigning.** If you're not sure what the subtleties are between these two, read Lesson 2! The main reasons I chose to do this are: 1) I think organizing is relatively poorly understood, even sometimes amongst self-proclaimed organizers, 2) I see a greater need for state and regional organizing than campaigning in the youth climate movement, and in social movements in general, and 3) my own organizing experiences, philosophy, and preferences have put me in the role of organizer more often than campaigner, so I simply know this role better. However, to be clear, I do believe that campaigning is a difficult and vital role in the rhythm of any effective organization.

**This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide**, and is the result of a couple of brainstorming sessions and a few subsequent writing periods, rather than any ongoing or strategic effort on my part. I would also like to own up front that I have a particular organizing style and philosophy, and it's worth noting that I've worked very independently and have been highly self-organized and self-motivated in this work over the past few years.

Finally, thanks to fellow field organizers Noelle Janka and Juliana Williams for providing valuable editing advice on short notice.

Enjoy, take what's useful, and get in touch!



## Lesson 1: Go To Them

We'll start off simple and straightforward. In order to organize with people, you have to meet them face-to-face, and it has to take place in a setting they're comfortable with. For me, that meant being on the road pretty frequently, and attending a lot of group meetings.

My ideal recipe for establishing a relationship with a new group of people went something like this:

- Find a youth sustainability leader through website, activist networks, and/or social networks
- Talk to them through email, or by phone if possible (or, at last resort, Facebook)
- Ask that person for details about what the group is working on and what the campus is like
- Tell them I'll be on the road in their area during a certain timeframe and try to set something up
- Drive to their campus to meet with a few core leaders for about 45 minutes before a group meeting
- Ask them more about group dynamics, campus sustainability, and what people are interested in
- Take 15 minutes at the beginning of the meeting to introduce myself, offer resources, collect contacts, and answer questions
- Participate in the meeting as if I were a group member
- Debrief after the meeting with a core group and establish next steps, including a regular check in time and point person

This is obviously my own organizing style/philosophy, but I've found it to be very important not to go to groups with a set agenda. The role of an organizer approaching a new group is two-fold: 1) as needed, help the group figure out what they want to do, and 2) help them do whatever that is really well.

An old organizing adage says that a good group has to work up to larger things over time, and needs to build in some easy victories in the beginning to establish its identity and create momentum. I think a similar formula can and should be followed for organizers working with new groups: focus on small victories like building recognition and providing resources before moving to bigger steps like hosting a conference, starting a campaign to take on a polluting company, etc.

Go to them. Ask them what they need and want (otherwise you'll never know!), and do what you can to provide it.

*Hot Tip: Travel is a necessary part of the job. During 2 years in the field in Ohio, I made over 100 visits to 31 campuses around the state, in addition to other events, conferences, and off-campus visits. I was probably on the road for several days in any given month during the school year. In retrospect, I maybe should've focused on fewer campuses, though since there was no existing network in Ohio I wouldn't have known which ones were worth visiting without going there myself!*

## Lesson 2: Organizers Organize Organizations (Organize First, Campaign Second)

Organizers organize organizations, while campaigners mobilize individuals and organizations around a particular goal. Both of these roles are important in making change, but organizing comes first. Here is a sampling of generalized similarities and differences between organizing and campaigning as I see them:

ORGANIZERS	CAMPAIGNERS
<p><i>Role in Organizations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are ultimately responsible for organizational tasks</li> <li>● Often come from within a group or network</li> <li>● Are accountable to an organization</li> <li>● Take more direction from an identified grassroots base</li> <li>● Tend to fill longer commitments</li> </ul> <p><i>Work Style</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tend to have patterned, even rhythmic, work plans over time</li> <li>● Spend 25% of their time on unexpected crises &amp; opportunities</li> <li>● Tend to have open-ended, exploratory, and supportive relationships</li> </ul> <p><i>Goals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build and care for holistic organizational health</li> <li>● Help people figure out how they'd like to increase their leadership</li> <li>● Are more concerned with long term personal &amp; group sustainability</li> <li>● Ultimately aim to make themselves obsolete</li> </ul>	<p><i>Role in Organizations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are ultimately responsible for campaign tasks</li> <li>● Often come from outside a group or network</li> <li>● Are accountable to achieving specific measurable results</li> <li>● Take more direction from a smaller number of people (or bosses)</li> <li>● Tend to fill shorter commitments</li> </ul> <p><i>Work Style</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tend to have short, variable work plans</li> <li>● Spend variable amounts of time on crises &amp; new opportunities</li> <li>● Tend to have shorter, outcome-oriented relationships</li> </ul> <p><i>Goals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build and care for the mobilization of people around a specific goal</li> <li>● Ask people to increase their leadership in specific ways</li> <li>● Are more concerned with short- and mid-term campaign goals</li> <li>● Are critical for a short period of time</li> </ul>

Looking at this list, you can see why it's important to enter a relationship initially as an organizer, with the potential of later switching more into campaign mode as needed or requested. When you're first meeting and working with someone, you want to be flexible and supportive, demonstrate that you'll be around for a while, and help them draw their ideas and leadership out of them. It's only after you've established a certain level of trust and gone through a campaign planning process with someone that you can orient your relationship around specific objectives without burning bridges.

Another layer can be added here when we explicitly incorporate justice and oppression in campaign and organizing work. What is your social background, and how are you perceived in different communities? How does that impact your ability to do work with certain groups of people? If we hope to win big (save the world, stop climate change, etc.), we've got to involve people from all walks of life in our campaigns and our victories. To build the movement for a clean, safe, and just world, we must first establish open and supportive relationships with a wide variety of new organizations. The Principles of Working Together and Principles of Alliance with Green Groups, located at <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/>, can be helpful in guiding us through this.

*Hot Tip: There's no magic moment someone turns from organizer to campaigner, and sometimes an organization grows out of a successful campaign, so this is a process that you have to navigate intuitively. Keep "organize first, campaign second" in mind and you'll do alright :0)*

## Lesson 3: Take Direct Action

As a student activist, I preferred campaign planning sessions to attending rallies; today I have a fondness for consensus meetings and spreadsheets. For me to say this, it must be true: we have GOT to orient more towards direct action! While I still very much view direct action as a tactic and not a strategy unto itself (for example, don't do guerrilla theater for the heck of it, do it because it makes sense for your campaign!), after a couple successes I'm very enthusiastic about it. Some stories to demonstrate:

### State Summit, House Visits, February 10, 2008

From Leo Sprinzen, Oberlin College freshman: “My first experience in direct action was in response to coal fired power plants. I stood in line with 50 others outside the houses of two men who may be responsible for a new coal plant, while spokespeople talked with the men in power. After standing attentively for ten long minutes in front of each house I filed out with the others feeling surprisingly elated. Information is powerful and letting the people in charge know how I and my fellow demonstrators felt by standing shoulder to shoulder holding arms and quietly looking down the most powerful Ohioans who live by coal spurred a sense of empowerment bigger than I could have imagined.”

Continue reading Leo's story here: <http://itsgettinghotinhere.org/2008/02/22/my-first-direct-action/>.



### MJSB 2008-Ohio, Utility Office Occupation, March 28, 2008

Friday morning, about fifty student and youth activists – most of whom had never participated in a direct action – marched to AMP headquarters in Columbus, Ohio, at which point a group of four negotiators entered the building and demanded a meeting with CEO Marc Gerken. Even when confronted by irate AMP employees, the youth negotiators kept their cool and stuck to their demands. They not only managed to meet with Gerken, but also got him to commit to a meeting between students, Meigs County activists and the AMP Board – and to agree that AMP wouldn't begin construction on the plant until after this meeting has taken place. *Story continues at:*

<http://itsgettinghotinhere.org/2008/03/29/mountain-justice-takes-on-king-coal-in-columbus/>

### DIY Campus Sustainability – OSU farm and CSU green roof

Direct action, although often conflated with conflict, opposition, and arrest, is at its core about doing something for yourself and others outside of the normal routes of power. A recent pro-active student initiated campus sustainability project in Columbus is the [OSU Waterman farm](#). While students had to form a class around their farm idea to legitimize it (which they actually wanted to do anyway), their project went from concept to production in just a year. The [Summer of Solutions](#) project is a broader example of things young folks can do when we take the initiative upon ourselves.

We desperately need more do-ers. I strongly believe that we have every idea and ability we need to win, it's just about providing the right encouragement and resources to get it done. Whether we're talking about community weatherization or stopping dirty energy facilities, youth climate organizers need to put more time and energy into helping young people take strategic direct action. It's time y'all.

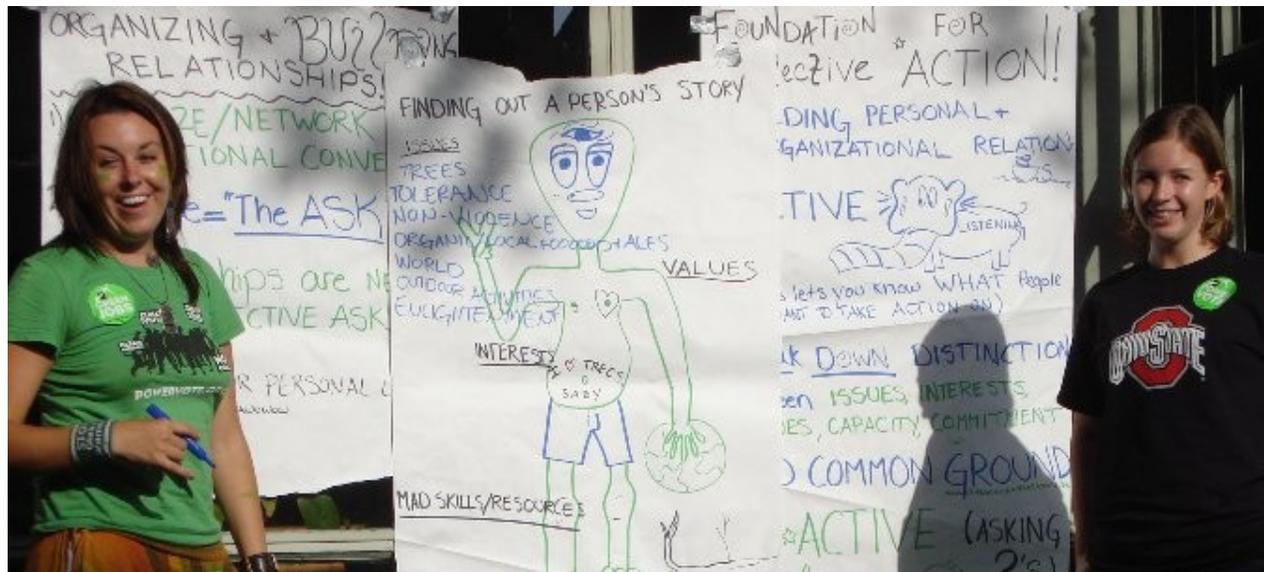
*Hot Tip: Always have an action component at conferences, at the absolute least something symbolic like a rally. In fact, consider planning your conference around an action – all those community building and skills trainings stick much better when they're put immediately to use.*

## Lesson 4: Be Sincere

If I had any ace up my sleeve, it'd be this one. Although missing from some lists of the natural qualities that make a good organizer (read Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals!), I think this one deserves some attention. All the ideal steps I laid out in “Lesson 1: Go To Them” are for nothing if done without sincerity. From an introductory phone call or email to group meetings and follow up, you're working with busy volunteers – if you want them to invest their time and energy into a relationship with you, you had better invest at least as much in them! It really shows when organizers truly believe in what they're doing, and it really, really shows when they're just going through the motions of doing what someone told them to.

Sincerity also requires good planning, follow up, and debriefing. I've definitely been guilty myself of being excited and inspiring at a group's meeting, only to fail to contact the group leaders for 2 weeks afterwards because I was in the middle of a long trip (or some such excuse). Not good! Students really like, and are often pleasantly surprised by, good follow up. Talk to them about group dynamics and processes, hopes and expectations for the future, next steps moving forward in their local work, etc. A good quality debrief after a meeting or event can also really solidify your relationship – since debriefing implies a desire to learn as we go and do things better next time, this is a good way to demonstrate your sincere investment in the group and in the cause. Oh, and also, show up to things on time!

In this corporatized world we've inherited, a little bit of humanity is a breath of fresh air and a great tool for connecting with young folks who haven't had the opportunity to step outside the harsh and narrow of growing up in an impersonal, unsustainable, and unjust society.



*Hot Tip: Many people's first impressions of you will be through email. To express a sense of sincerity and individuality, try to close your messages with something real. I like to end emails with things like “for the land and the people, m!”, and include events and links I care about in my signature line.*

## Lesson 5: Build Networks and Coalitions

I had a vague notion about the value of statewide networks when I started organizing in Ohio. Taking cues from other successful efforts, particularly models from the Southern Energy Network, the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, and Global Exchange, a switch from “national” work to a more specific geography just made sense to me. It was only after the excitement of 100+ Ohioans in one room at Power Shift 2007, and the subsequent founding of OSEC, that I came to more deeply understand the value of and work involved in building and maintaining a grassroots organization. Put simply, a statewide or regional organizer needs a statewide or regional organization, and vice-versa. You can find out much more about the structure, policies, support networks, and other resources of and for existing state and regional networks at the fabulous Sustainable State Networks wiki: <http://sustainablestatenetworks.pbworks.com/>.



State networks are the prime conduit for information and organizing power in the youth climate movement today. State-level student leaders have been responsible for making organizational and campaign decisions that set the tone and agenda not only at the local level, but also at the national and international level, as organizers like myself relay leaders' thoughts and priorities up and down the networks. Annual state and regional conferences are ideal opportunities to cultivate organizing networks and identify and build the skills of these emerging leaders.

What Networks Offer	What Networks and Coalitions Require
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Decentralization and cross-pollination of organizational processes and campaign tactics</li> <li>● A stronger sense of unity and geographic identity</li> <li>● Broader intake net for new people</li> <li>● Name recognition</li> <li>● Collaborative events, trainings, and fundraising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● At least several hours/week from a paid central coordinator</li> <li>● Several lead volunteers / a grassroots Steering Committee</li> <li>● A couple top volunteers, preferably stipended</li> <li>● Truly collaborative decision-making</li> <li>● Strategic planning sessions</li> <li>● Regular (monthly) conference calls</li> <li>● Occasional (2-3/year) leadership retreats</li> <li>● Annual conferences</li> <li>● Fundraising to make all these things happen</li> <li>● A basic mission statement, logo, and website</li> <li>● Digital communication – Facebook group, listserv, etc.</li> <li>● Good facilitation!</li> </ul>
<p><b>What Coalitions Additionally Offer</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The mobilization of a network's unity</li> <li>● High-level theory, action, and reflection amongst leaders</li> <li>● Greater power in numbers</li> <li>● Collaborative media strategy</li> <li>● Greater fundraising potential</li> </ul>	

*Hot Tip: Don't get bogged down in structure and process when forming a network or coalition. Focus on building a vibrant social network and planning annual conferences first. After that, the only decisions you really need to make are 1) what constitutes the membership or leadership, 2) a decision-making process, and 3) what campaign to focus on. For help in choosing a campaign, check out the Campaign Selection Survey at <http://campusactivism.org/displayresource-764.htm>.*

## Lesson 6: Get Off Campus

I cheated on this one – I only knew one person when I moved to this state, Elisa Young, an inspiring activist in southeast Ohio working for energy justice in the crosshairs of the highest concentration of proposed coal infrastructure in the nation. Most other state and regional organizers have built a student base before connecting with local environmental justice groups. In my experience, it's vital to connect students with community struggles. I believe that getting young people active outside of their bubbles is one of the greatest gifts you can offer as a youth climate organizer.



There are too many reasons why for me to list here in detail, but here's a snapshot:

1. Since it often involves and requires a more dynamic range of skills and experiences than campus organizing does, community organizing is a great opportunity for young people you work with to gain experience and expand their leadership.
2. Off campus work involves and impacts a greater variety of people, which we must do better to win on big issues like climate change.
3. Connecting young folks to struggles in their own backyards can increase their commitment to issues and the area around them.
4. Local community struggles often *really* need help, and lack funding from school resources or government agencies.
5. State and regional student leaders will want something big to work on together, so off campus work makes sense as the network grows. Similarly, this kind of work also helps to network groups and build power for larger campaigns.
6. Getting young folks involved in off-campus issues increases the likelihood they will become life-long community organizers themselves, which is ultimately the goal of any good organizer.

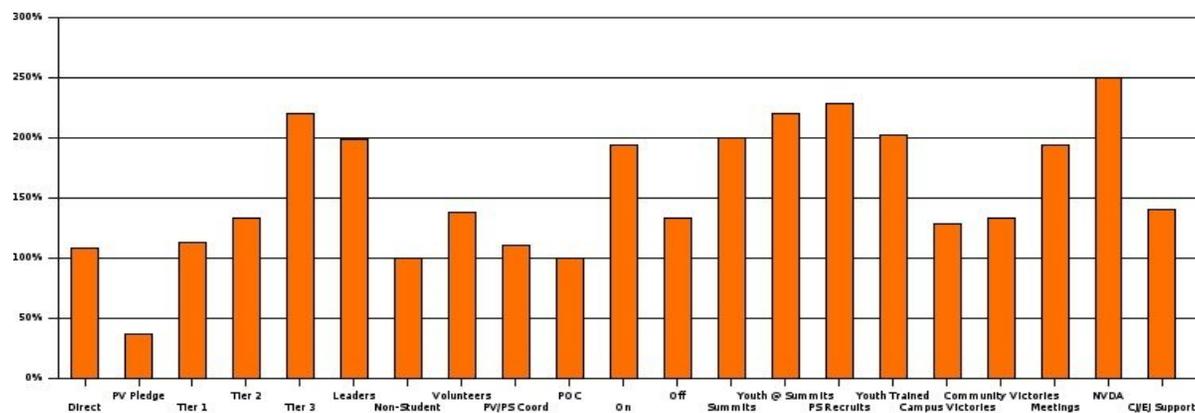
Some organizers in the Energy Action Coalition spend most of their time doing off-campus organizing. For those of you who don't but would like to start, you can contact the Energy Justice Network to connect with environmental justice groups in your area – this will lead you to some of the most fiery and genuine folks you'll ever meet :0)

*Hot tip: A much expanded version of this section including a primer on community organizing, four great ways to help communities, what community solidarity work looks like, overcoming obstacles, and case studies is available in the Campus-Community Organizing Guide, which I wrote 2 years ago (interestingly enough, right before I started statewide work). It's available for download at: <http://www.energyjustice.net/campus/>.*

## Lesson 7: (Sticking to) Your Work Plan

It doesn't sound very sexy, but some of the most animated Energy Action Coalition workshops I've attended were on work planning. Organizing without a good work plan is less effective, inconsistent, and prone to burnout. So, what is a work plan, and how can I stick to it?

**A work plan is a long-term strategy** broken into quantitative goals over specific periods of time. **A work plan is NOT a to-do list.** It includes specific organizational and campaign goals, a rough timeline with fixed dates and, if you're like me, graphs and color-coding :0) My work plans have evolved over the past few years to include a mission statement, tasks and sub-tasks, and quantitative measurements of young people exposed to campaign work, leadership and volunteer involvement, on- and off-campus media, gatherings held, youth trained, victories, meetings with politicians, non-violent direct actions, and money raised through grassroots fundraising. This is my reward:



Tuh duh! With the proper obsession with spreadsheets, you too can make something like this, if you stick to your work plan and stay focused! Everybody has different strategies, but here are the tactics that have worked for me:

1. Set aside a full day, preferably with co-workers, to create a detailed work plan that lays out up to 3 goals/themes for each quarter, month, and week. I plan weekly priorities for an entire year, and then revisit it and plan smaller chunks in more detail every 6 weeks or so.
2. To track accomplishments, I use a spreadsheet with several tabs that updates totals automatically, and generates the beautiful chart above.
3. A durable and portable one-on-ones notebook to record conversations.
4. A durable and portable everything notebook, where I record everything, note to-do items, and write in really small font.
5. A white board! This is my favorite tool. I plan out my entire week, cross things off each day, and wipe it clean at the end. Very gratifying.
6. My pocket planner is critical for quickly recording meetings, calls, next one-on-ones, etc. I use this to lay out a base of tasks each week.
7. Every Monday I whiteboard my one-on-ones, tasks relevant to my weekly priorities, and any other things listed in my planner. It's also useful to leave Friday open for catching up (or even \*gasp\* a day off!).
8. Every day, I record my hours and what I did. Every two weeks, I total up my hours, identify significant achievements, and share with co-workers.
9. Finally, a good time budgeting approach has been to plan out 75% of my time, leaving 25% open for crises and unexpected opportunities.

*Hot Tip: Set two alarms, one close to your bed and the other far away, or get a wake-up buddy to call each other at a set time each morning. The occasional day with nothing pressing until 3PM can really set you back (particularly when your room is 50 degrees in the winter!).*

## Wrapping Up: Take Care of Yourself

There's a saying that goes "the movement will only truly need you when you realize the movement doesn't need you". Ultimately, this thing was around before you, and it will be around long after you're gone. Social movements are bigger than any one of us, and we should approach organizing in a humble and realistic way. If dedication means long nights and sore feet, it also means personal reflection and vacation. Although I wouldn't necessarily recommend frequent drop-everything vacations (simply because the email backlog can be counter-productive) if you can't find at least two weeks a year to spend less than 20 hours a week on work-related stuff, you need to consider taking some serious time off!

The movement will need you when you realize you're but one of many burning souls trying to build people power for the long haul, and when you can show that you're ready to stick around and see things through. We need lots of folks bringing people together, building power, and taking action only as much as we need healthy, long-term contributors. When in doubt, check in with someone with more experience from outside of your organization (I'm happy to be such a person!).

Also, there is an ironic loneliness to community organizing. You're often meeting and working with tons of exciting people, but have few relationships that go beyond activist interactions or that involve a truly mutual exchange. I have found it essential to live in a supportive, non-climate-organizing community house, play the banjo, host weekly potlucks, go to dance parties, and grow an increasing amount of my own food. Find what sustains you and stick with it – the time spent will be worth it.

## About Me

I served as the Coordinator of the Ohio Student Environmental Coalition, based in Columbus, for two years between 2007 and 2009. My involvement in the youth climate movement started as a Syracuse University student who saw a pressing need for climate action, later as an Energy Justice Network intern and interim National Council Coordinator for the Student Environmental Action Coalition who began to realize the full human impacts of coal, and finally as the OSEC Founder and Coordinator committed to building an economy and climate worth fighting for. I have a degree in women's studies and sociology, and am a founder of the Mountain Justice Spring Break Planning Collective and an intentional community currently based in Columbus. I served on the Energy Action Coalition's Anti-Oppression working group for 3 years, including 1 year as its convener.

As of this writing, I find myself desiring to make change and organize community in different ways than I did when I started this work, and to be transparent I'm also feeling hints of burnout. While I plan to remain involved in a lesser capacity, this writing is intended to be something of a parting gift to the Energy Action community, which I have learned so much from and very much grew up in as an organizer.

You can reach me at [matt@energyjustice.net](mailto:matt@energyjustice.net) or 315.450.6628. Please do get in touch with any questions, comments, or requests.

-sincerely, m!-