



Organizer Roundtable: The Ecology of Organizing

In April and May of 2010, organizers from throughout the Twin Cities came together for two Alliance for Metropolitan Stability Organizer Roundtables to learn about and discuss the Ecology of Organizing, a system of thinking devised by David Nicholson of the Headwaters Foundation. Karen Starr and David Nicholson then facilitated a group dialogue, based on the unique experiences of the organizers in attendance.

At the first session, David Nicholson [presented his theory on community organizing](#), which recognizes an ecosystem of social justice organizing happening right now in the Twin Cities. If we look at the field of organizing as an interdependent web of relationships, how can we more intentionally strengthen our relationships to sustain our work?

The health of an ecosystem is dependent on biodiversity. Some different forms of organizing are place-based, cultural, values-based (such as faith-based), issue-based, and labor organizing. The diversity of organizing in the Twin Cities is an asset to building a social justice movement. Movement building is about sustained transformational change that is supported by collective intentional action. This interconnected web of relationships can sustain interactions across time to bring about social justice advances at a larger scale and scope. Through this comes a shift in critical thinking in our communities and new collective identities that can lead to mass mobilization for social justice. Often we position ourselves against each other falsely when in reality we are organizing within a whole movement without recognizing our connections.

The organizers present broke into small groups to discuss these ideas and to explore holistic approaches to justice and social change work. Some ideas that were surfaced during this discussion include:

- Organizing spans multiple categories and issues – when you organize around one issue, you’re actually impacting other issues simultaneously.
- A common organizing language framework can unite movements and work toward something larger; allow for partnerships and cross-sector organizing.
- Community organizing is not just pulling weeds and reacting to things as they come along; it is planting the types of plants that will block weeds from growing.
- Local issues have regional significance.
- Organizing should not just target certain people – it should be about getting information out to everyone so they can be involved, and expanding the movement.
- Organizing is not effective when we mobilize the same people over and over again.
- Intentional conversations lead to movements around a common worldview.
- Diversity is the most vital and exciting aspect of organizing.
- Organizations ought to communicate strategies that work.
- The ecological model is based on the interdependence of people, places, issues, quality of life and neighborhood stability.
- An important part of organizing is making connections with organizations that are already active and in motion (we don’t have to reinvent the wheel).
- Organizing is from the heart – there is a resource in every person. This idea gets left behind when we become too focused on one aspect of our work.
- A common worldview or framework (such as anti-racism) helps foster work across organizations.
- Communicating and sharing experiences unites organizations and allows for mutual support and more impact.

The takeaway from the first session was that each of our organizing projects and campaigns are an integral part of the whole of the social justice movement.

At the second session, organizers joined together to [map out the organizing work represented in the room](#), and how that collective work was connected to the ecology of the movement. This mapping session led to a rich discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing organizers in the room.

In organizing, carrying out the goals is more difficult than naming them. Organizers should not prescribe the outcomes, but should facilitate a process for the community to name the issues facing them, and develop goals and strategies to address them. It is challenging for organizers to focus on just one goal because there is too much emphasis on the outcome. In organizing, process is a product. Often, the desired outcome is hard to prescribe although it probably shouldn't be. An organizer needs a great deal of focus to facilitate a community process that results in clear outcomes and goals.

It is hard for organizers to lift our heads out of our work to see each other and how we are connected. We sometimes lack a true understanding or knowledge of the connections between our work and our communities. If we are to come together to address the whole ecology of social change in the Twin Cities, we can't come to the table saying "I am right. I have the answers."

Sometimes it seems we are all working next door to each other but not together. It is important that we work together and build coalitions on our mutual issues and interests. But it is not easy – cross-cultural organizing requires one-on-one relationship building and building coalitions brings yet another layer of work on top of what we are already doing. With limited resources, there is not much time to take that extra step.

But despite all of these challenges, organizers must take the time to recognize the connections between our work. Otherwise, we will sacrifice the greater progressive movement for short-term, local gains. We are all one, and we must work together. Our hearts beat in common as we work with our communities.