

# Relational Organizing: A Primer

## 1) Attention is not commitment.

**The Montgomery Bus Boycott was 381 days. That's over a year.**

Consider that the people who were boycotting were also the people who were most economically vulnerable, the ones least likely to have private cars. Buses were the way they got to work, earned money, fed their families. It was a severe hardship to give it up.

And they didn't even know it would stop after 381 days! They had to keep going knowing it could last 500. 600. *That* is commitment.

While a march may get the attention of hundreds of thousands for a day, a few weeks, even a month, and there's unequivocal value in experiences that break through the status quo and help transform one's understanding of oneself, they do not demand commitment.

While a scorching video of the hypocrisy and corruption of many of today's politicians helps educate, and the 10,000 Facebook shares are critical in spreading the word, it does not demand commitment.

**What builds commitment is *relationships*.**

It's because of *relationships* that people boycotting were able to share rides to work and make the hardship viable. It's because there were events every single night in community centers and local churches that brought the resistance together that their fires were fueled. It's because they cared more about each other than those who scorned them, and because they knew they were each other's safety net, that the boycotters could keep fighting.

You have to pour yourself into developing those relationships at every opportunity.

## 2) A constituency is not a client base.

"Constituency" comes from the Latin "constare," meaning "to stand with."

"Client" is derived from "inclinare," meaning "to lean on."

We *market* campaigns and candidates. We try to sell them like consumer goods. That didn't come out of a vacuum -- that's the direction society at large has taken.

But when you're a client, you're looking out for what's best for your individual gain. It's more consumeristic. In what ways have we lost sight, then, of our collective commitment to each other as a constituency?

What is the impact when the phrase "our kids" no longer means our town's kids, but our own biological kids? How does that change our choices or behaviors, say, when the local school is failing? Do we jump in and try to save it, or do we flee and save ourselves? We need leadership to hold constituencies together.

## 3) Leadership is not simply having tools.

**Leadership is enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty.**

Tools will help you get there; but it takes developing leadership to inspire others to achieve a greater purpose when things don't feel safe.

Neither is it charisma. Magnetic personalities can give great speeches, but don't necessarily help enable others. Cesar Chavez was a complete introvert.

This is why the OFA Fellowship, and especially the Fellows Leaders program are so important. Leadership is a process, not a trait. It takes continual work and self-work and awareness to manifest—if we view leadership as simply telling people what they need to do, we are not actually leading.

#### **4) Aggregation is not organization.**

Just because you have 10,000 people at a march or 100,000 people sign a petition does not mean you automatically win. You have to have a strategy, you have to have a plan, and you have to do the work. This is where issue ecosystems come into play, and why it's so important to have a strategy instead of taking action in scattershot form.

#### **5) Formulas are not a craft.**

Best practices are incredibly helpful so we don't start from scratch, but they're only a starting point. You can't reduce things to a formula for success.

Organizing is a journey that requires you to challenge yourself and step into moments of discomfort with an eye towards improving both yourself and the people you are working with. Oftentimes, organizing can often be viewed in conjunction with service to the individuals we are organizing. You must learn to sense others' values and fears, joys and pains, seize the right moment at the right time, and be willing to transform both yourself and others.

Tradition is a tool. Don't get stuck in tradition for tradition's sake, but also be wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Wisdom lays in the middle.