

Audio Script: Organizing 200 – Identifying Issues

Welcome to Organizing 200

This course should take you about 30 minutes to complete.

It is one of the required courses for the Certificate of Completion in the Organizing track.

The prerequisite for this course is Organizing 100

The sections in this course are:

- Identifying an Organizing Issue
- Assessing Employees at the Worksite
- One Example, and
- You Decide

Section 1: Identifying an Organizing Issue

[Issues that build the union]

“An issue is a problem that people feel strongly enough about to work to change.”

This is a quote from Si Kahn, a civil rights activist, labor and community organizer and musician for over 45 years, from his book, “Organizing: a Guide for Grass Roots Leaders.”

Let’s explore the process of identifying those issues that we can organize around.

As we look for issues that can be organized around to build the union, we need to be looking for issues that can be stated clearly and briefly, such as, *“Get it done!”*

These same issues must affect a lot of union members and others in the workplace or in their lives – in other words, the issue should be widely held. How many people does it need to affect in order to be an issue we should use? Who are the people affected?

People feel strongly about issues - strongly enough to ‘work to change’ them, as Si Kahn said. They must be deeply felt. How will you know people feel this strongly about any given issue?

Organizing issues are things people can be united around - and how do you know if that applies to your issue?

These issues must be things employees will do something about - how do you know if your chosen issue will cause people to act?

Finally, the issues we organize around must be winnable – at least in part...how can you predict which issues are winnable?

[How will you know?]

The basic test to determine if your issue is a good candidate for an organizing action is to ask yourself:

First, is the issue deeply felt? Do the people concerned about the issue really care about it? Are several people emotionally involved when you are talking about the issue? If an issue is deeply felt, it may be a candidate for organizing.

The next question is how widely is the issue held? Are there many employees concerned about the issue? Does it involve more than one department? Perhaps it involves everyone at a particular worksite...If an issue is widely held, it is likely to be an organizing issue.

Be sure you read and understand Local 1000's contract with the state to decide if you have a grievance. If it is a grievance, or if it is a possible Unfair Labor Practice, AND it is deeply felt and widely held you probably have an excellent organizing issue.

If these tests are not met, you either have a grievance or an Unfair Labor Practice or it's a personal issue. It is a grievance if it is a violation of the contract, or an Unfair Labor Practice if it is in direct conflict with an existing law. We have the grievance process in place to resolve contract issues and you should use the grievance process for this kind of issue.

The issue might be an Unfair Labor Practice if it is in direct conflict with an existing law. Again, we have mechanisms in place to deal with ULPs, so be sure to use these processes when applicable.

You might still have an organizing issue if your is not deeply felt and widely held, but many people will be motivated to become involved in the issue.

Section One Review

Members at a California Department of Education, CDE worksite were complaining of odors and feeling ill. The Chief Steward and the Union Organizer told members that if they had sick time they should use it. Many members started calling in sick. The Chief Steward and Union Organizer then conducted a walk-through of the building, interviewed members, and personally experienced the offending odors. The Chief Steward and Union Organizer contacted CDE and requested an independent investigation by OSHA. During this conversation the Union Organizer made a comment about the number of employees calling in sick at that worksite. OSHA told the Union Organizer that there is a major problem in the building and if CDE fixed it there would be a lot fewer sick days.

This situation is:

- a) A grievance
- b) *An organizing issue*
- c) An unfair labor practice

The answer is B - this is an organizing issue because it is widely held - all of the employees at the worksite are affected. It is deeply felt - many of the employees were getting sick from the odors, and it should get everyone motivated to become involved.

What is the most important question to ask when deciding if an issue will make a good organizing issue?

- a) Is the issue one that has never been grieved?
- b) Is the issue a violation of state law?
- c) *Is the issue widely held and deeply felt?*
- d) Is the issue on the ballot of the next statewide election?

The answer is C - First, how widely is this issue held? Are there many employees concerned about the issue? Does it involve more than one department, classification or bargaining unit? If an issue is widely held, it is likely to be an organizing issue.

The next question is, is the issue deeply felt? Do the people concerned about the issue really care about it? If an issue is deeply felt, it may be a candidate for organizing.

It is important to read and understand our contract with the state of California because:

- a) It is required in order to be certified as a steward.
- b) *Knowing your contract will help you identify a grievable issue.*
- c) The contract contains information that can help you get a promotion.
- d) The contract tells you what is a violation of state law.

The answer is B - If you know and understand the contract you will be able to identify what issues are grievable and what issues are not.

Section 2: Assessing Employees at the Worksite

[An Important Element of a Campaign]

Talking about assessments may seem like a strange place to start for a course on identifying issues for organizing campaigns. However, assessing employees at the worksite is one of the most important elements of a campaign.

Assessing employees means evaluating how each of your co-workers feels about the upcoming action and even about Local 1000 in general. This understanding will be very helpful as you choose actions, plan the actions, and organize the employees.

[Assessing Support for the Action]

The assessment can come from a conversation with the worksite group about the issue you are considering taking action on. As you talk with the group you can take notes - comments, concerns, and you can quickly record your impression of each person's attitude about the possible action.

Here is a chart of common assessments of co-workers as it applies to any possible organizing action.

The numbers are a quick way to identify the level of support you anticipate from each employee. Number ones are very supportive and are willing to be leaders in the action by motivating others to join in. Number twos are supportive but are not willing to be leaders. Number threes are the undecided group - these are the people you will be working to educate and include in the action. You want them to become number twos. Number fours are those who are negative about the action, and might even be negative about Local 1000 in general.

[Why is assessment important to an organizing campaign?]

Why is this assessment process important to an organizing campaign?

Making real assessments is key when organizing employees. Assessment systems help organizers and stewards understand support for the action - and the union - at each phase of a worksite issue campaign.

An assessment system is a way to take a 'snap-shot' of union support at any stage in the campaign, so that strategies and tactics can be adjusted if necessary.

Assessments are, therefore, taken continually throughout every campaign because employees' opinions and support can change as the campaign progresses from the initial contact, through the various escalating phases and on to the final phase of your campaign.

Depending on your assessment results, you can determine what you must do to progress to the next stage of the campaign, or IF you should progress to the next stage.

At the start of every campaign, we need to assess or know where employees stand on supporting the union. The more accurate our assessments are, the better we can organize our resources and make plans to move the campaign forward.

In the middle phase of the campaign, the issue should be clear and the organizer should be developing tests to measure each employees' continued support. The goal of assessing is to move undecided employees - rated as #3s - up to #2 to support Local 1000.

The undecided employees must first be identified, then the steward and the leaders - rated as #1s - can work to include and engage these undecided employees to become part of the organizing action.

[Escalation]

One specific way to use an issue assessment is in the development of the escalation of actions. With the issue clearly identified, the actions to resolve the issue will want to grow across a continuum of risk. This continuum illustrates the escalation of organizing actions from low risk to high risk and identifies actions that belong at each level of risk.

On the easy end, wearing something - an arm band, a t-shirt or a purple shirt, OR attending something - a meeting, or a rally at the capitol, are good examples of low risk actions.

Medium risk actions involve putting your name on something. This can include signing a petition, or signing-in at a meeting. Sharing you signature is a higher risk than just having your name on a list.

High risk actions involve putting your face 'out there' - joining a march on the boss, walking out of the office on a solidarity break, or picketing the front of the office.

[Define the Win]

Once the issue is identified and employees agree that they want to take action to solve it, it is critical that the win has been identified and is clear to all employees. You must state clearly how you will know when you have won the action.

Some employees will hold out for an extreme solution - the firing of a supervisor, or

the closing of a stuffy office - your plan must include a reasonable and attainable solution. Some reasons for keeping the solution attainable include the possibility of winning the action, the increased support of employees because of the successes and the willingness of all to participate again because of the success attained by the action.

Section Two Review

As part of an organizing campaign or action, assessment is

- a) A way to evaluate work performance
- b) A way to rate the supervisor
- c) A way to decide on the escalation of the issue
- d) *A way to identify employees who support the issue or the action*

The answer is D - Assessing employees means identifying how co-workers feel about the upcoming action, and about Local 1000 in general. This knowledge will be very helpful as you choose actions, plan the actions, and organize the employees.

A system of assessment can

- a) Be printed and posted in the break room
- b) Be helpful when organizing a DLC election
- c) Provide content for fliers and brochures about the action
- d) *Help organizers and stewards understand support for the action*

The answer is D - Assessment systems help organizers and stewards understand the level of support for the action - and for the union - at each phase of a campaign.

Assessments of the organizing action should be done

- a) Once, at the beginning of the action
- b) Once, at the end of the action
- c) Twice, once at the beginning and again at the end of the action
- d) *Periodically throughout the action*

The answer is D - Assessments should be taken continually throughout the various escalating phases of the campaign.

Section Three: One Example

Here is a scenario to analyze, use that analysis to define the issue, and then be able to understand who has the power to solve the problem.

The employees at EDD were notified on March 1, 2011 that their office was being considered for closure. The office is just north of the California/Mexico border. Several of these employees live in Mexico and others live in the Imperial Valley, which is rated as a 'blighted economic area' of the state.

This EDD office provides many services to farm workers, Spanish-only-speaking residents, those employees with minimal or no transportation, and employees in the same blighted economic area.

The state employees want to save their office from closure.

[What are the issues?]

What are the issues in this scenario?

The three main issues are that the disadvantaged farm workers were going to be left without vital services they need to provide for their families; that the community is already considered blighted which adds to the seriousness of the office closure; and that EDD employees would have a difficult time finding employment in the geographic area due to the economic stresses within the community.

[How did they approach the problem?]

Employees approached this problem by planning an informational picket on Caesar Chavez Day on March 31, 2011. EDD employees and their families along with farm workers and their families picketed the Calexico EDD office. They received newspaper, radio and television media coverage for the event. The farm workers told stories about how the services provided by the office helped them take care of their families and the employees told stories of how important their services are to the community.

[Who had the power?]

Who had the power in this action? The employees and the community allies had considerable power in this scenario. The office did not close due to pressure put on management by these two groups. The employees kept their jobs and the farm workers continued to receive the support they need.

Section Three Review

What was the organizing action mentioned in the example of the proposed closing of the EDD office?

- a) The employees work stickers
- b) The employees and farm workers signed a petition
- c) *The employees and farm workers held an informational picket*
- d) The employees filed a grievance

The answer is C - Employees planned an informational picket on Caesar Chavez Day on March 31, 2011. EDD employees and their families along with farm workers and their families picketed the Calexico EDD office. They received newspaper, radio and television media coverage for the event

Reflect back on this EDD office example. Why do you think the employees and community allies had enough power to keep the office open?

People power turned this issue of closing the office into a cause that engaged the employees and the community

Section Four: You Decide

[Nursing vs CDE]

Let's take a look at some workplace scenarios and see if we can spot the organizing issues...Our first set of scenarios involves a scheduling issue and an issue of holiday staffing.

Scenario A - Management posts a schedule in the nursing department at Folsom prison two weeks in advance as required by the contract, but then on Friday afternoon changes the schedule for the next week affecting 80% of the employees.

Scenario B - The contract states that employees should alternate holidays off. In the California Department of Education, CDE, one employee is needed to work on each holiday, and there are four employees in the department. Management never requires one of these employees to work the holiday because his wife died last year and he has two small children. Many of these employees sympathize with him.

[Which is the organizing issue and why?]

Scenario A is the better choice for an organizing issue because the situation impacts a large number of people - 80% of the employees - and it is a violation of the contract. Since it is a violation of the contract, this is also a potential grievance.

[Unfriendly vs Lunch]

Our second set of scenarios looks at an unfriendly supervisor and a disrespectful one.

Scenario A - The department's director started two years ago and has never even met with the department's custodians. When he walks down the hall he doesn't even say hello. Some employees would like to have him replaced.

Scenario B - A month ago the manager for the custodians told them that they could not have lunch in the cafeteria because they were service employees. Then last week she yelled at a 30-year employee because he dropped a bucket of mop water. She has a long history of treating employees with disrespect.

[Which is the organizing issue?]

Scenario B - In this situation the manager is disrespectful of employees and shows discrimination against the custodians by not letting them eat in the cafeteria. Also, this issue affects all custodians at this location and, if this 30-year employee is well-known, it is likely to get support from other classifications as well.

In Scenario A the director is simply being unfriendly and rude, and that is just a personality trait, not a reason for a work action or a grievance.

[Attendance vs Loud]

This next set of scenarios involves the firing of two different employees.

Scenario A - An office tech was recently fired by the supervisor for poor attendance and insubordination. Some employees feel that the supervisor always tries to be reasonable and a few believe that the office tech was way out of line. Another employee in the department says that the employee is always right.

Scenario B - A steward was recently fired for insubordination. The steward was representing another employee and told management that their policies were discriminatory. Management claims that the steward said this loudly and in front of others. All of the employees agreed that it was the supervisor who was loud. The employees also know that management wants to get rid of this steward because contract negotiations are ready to begin and this steward is a leader of the negotiating team.

[Which is the organizing issue? Why?]

Scenario B is the organizing issue - Management unfairly disciplined the steward for performing the duties of a union steward. This is an Unfair Labor Practice, a ULP, because the steward is being penalized for simply being a steward, and that is a violation of the Dills Act.

It is also an organizing issue because it is widely held and deeply felt among the other employees.

[Holiday Work vs Staffing]

Our final set of scenarios concern working on holidays and an understaffed office.

Scenario A - Some employees in one work area want to change how they get selected to work holidays under the contract, but they were not successful in making this change during the last contract negotiations because no one wanted to take action about the issue. They figure that they will end up working the same number of holidays under either system. You know that it will take a long, difficult fight to change this.

Scenario B - Several employees tell you that the communications department is understaffed - the office techs have too many duties and too little time. You meet with these office techs. They suggest that one way of improving workloads is to have processes streamlined. Recently, office techs in the accounting department have been sent home early because of a lack of work. They are able to perform the same duties that office techs in communications do and would like to be able to help pick up the slack. You know that this will be a long, difficult fight, but you really believe it will make a difference in workloads affecting both departments.

[Which is the organizing issue and why?]

Scenario B is the organizing issue here. With the communications department *understaffed*, and the office techs in accounting *overstaffed*, the solution posed by the office techs is reasonable and could be effective. Management is not hearing or respecting the ideas of their staff. This issue would make a good organizing issue because it is widely held, deeply felt, and potentially affects a much larger number of people.

Section Four Review

What are the two qualities which identify an organizing issue?

- a) It involves time off and holiday pay
- b) It involves legal and the contract
- c) *It is deeply felt and widely held*
- d) It is union-based and clearly written

The answer is C - To identify an issue as a potential organizing issue, it must be deeply felt - that is, have an emotional connection, and widely held by a large number of people.

To be an effective organizing issue, the issue must relate to language that is in the contract.

- a) True
- b) *False*

The answer is false - any issue that is deeply felt and widely held is a candidate for organizing. The result of the organizing action might be to include a resolution to the issue in a future contract, but the two are not otherwise connected.

End of Course

This completes Organizing 200.

Your next step is to take and pass the Final Exam to complete this course.

Take the other required courses to earn your Certificate of Completion in the Organizing track.