



Organizing Versus Apathy

Secret #1: Organizing

Attitude Adjustment

You're reading this. That means you're interested in organizing where you work. You want to fix problems you see around you. Maybe something unfair has happened to you, or to someone you work with, and you want to do something about it.

For us, that's **organizing**.

Organizing is a lot like cooking: there are time-tested recipes that anyone can learn, methods that work and some that don't. Your results may not be perfect every time-since we're dealing with human beings here - but you will do better if you learn from the successes and mistakes of the organizers who've gone before you.

Organizing Is an Attitude

Organizing is first an attitude. It's the attitude that you and your co workers together can do something to make things better. It's the attitude that action is better than complaining. It's the attitude that problems are just waiting for a solution, and that strength in numbers is part of that solution.

It's the refusal to be discouraged - at least not for long. It's the willingness to listen to others with respect, so that the plan you come up with reflects the good ideas of many people.

If you have the organizing attitude, you feel it is necessary to respond to unfairness. You are committed to building power with your coworkers, not just talking about it. You believe in collective action and want to get better at putting others in motion.

Secret #2 Apathy

Apathy Isn't Real

The first attitude adjustment an organizer needs is to get over the idea that co-workers don't care-- that your workplace is bogged down in "apathy."

It might feel like your co-workers don't care. But it's more likely that people are scared to say anything or feel powerless. They might say everything is fine because they don't believe it can



change, or they can't imagine it being different, or they assume the problem they care about isn't a "union issue." Organizing is the antidote.

Excerpts from: Secrets #1 and #2, Chapter 1, Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter, Secrets of a Successful Organizer, Labor Notes, 2018.

What's the Real Problem?

Your workplace may feel like it's bogged down in "apathy," but under the surface, there's always something else going on. Here are some ways to understand what looks like apathy and respond to it.

"NO ONE SEEMS TO CARE."

What's going on: Everyone cares about something—but the something might not be what you expect.

- The issue you're focused on might not be a priority for your co worker.
- She might feel strongly about other issues that haven't caught your attention.
- She might assume her problem isn't your issue or isn't a union issue.

What to do: Listen.

- Pick a few co-workers you'd like to know better. Make a point of talking with them to find out what's on their minds.
- Show respect and understanding for the issues your co-workers care about, and they'll be more likely to do the same for you.

"IT'S HARD TO SEE HOW THINGS COULD CHANGE."

What's going on: Your co-workers don't believe that they have power—yet.

- Most people have always felt powerless and disorganized at work. They've never felt strength in numbers.
- Problems seem too big to tackle.
- The boss has cemented the idea that his decisions are final.

What to do: Inspire your co-workers. Show them that change is possible if you work together.

- Bring people together. Group support can help build hope.
- Start small. Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board so far. When a tiny campaign gets results, more people will be drawn in, and their confidence will grow.



- Develop a credible plan to win. Ask, “What solution are we proposing?” “Who in management has the authority to say yes?” “What could we do together to get that person to say yes?”
- Share stories of tactics that have worked elsewhere.

“NO ONE’S WILLING TO DO ANYTHING.”

What’s going on: Many people won’t initiate activity, but they might respond if asked directly by someone they trust.

What to do: Figure out small, specific requests. Approach co-workers personally.

- Respect the time constraints in your co-workers’ lives.
- Show lots of appreciation for anything they’re willing to do.
- Make it clear that any victories were won by the whole team.

“NO ONE COMES TO MEETINGS.”

What’s going on: People won’t be motivated to come unless they feel their participation matters.

- If a meeting is just to “get information,” it’s easy to skip it.
- An email or a notice on the bulletin board usually won’t inspire people to attend.

What to do: Give your co-workers meaningful roles. Let them know how their presence or absence will affect issues they care about.

- Make the meeting pleasant and productive. Prepare a clear agenda, a time limit, and a reason to attend, such as a hot issue.
- Face-to-face invitations are best. Divide up your workplace and find several other people to share the work of inviting people individually.
- Consider the practical things that can make meetings more accessible: scheduling, location, childcare, translation, transportation.
- Be flexible. Sometimes people simply can’t make it to meetings, but they can still play crucial roles in organizing while they’re at work.

Discuss:

1. Which of the common expressions of apathy mentioned in this resource can you relate to? Give a concrete example from your experience.
2. Identify at least one strategy in the resource that you can see yourself using. Strategies are found in the sections titled What to do.

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