How come I do all the work around here?

Well, either you’re being punished or you’re not recruiting members and volunteers. Every task that an organizer does alone—every envelope stuffed, every phone call made, every page typed—is a lost opportunity to recruit someone else to do that job. Many organizations would be far stronger if their staff and leaders resolved to do nothing else but find others to volunteer for all the jobs.

In some ways recruitment is the most important subject we deal with in this manual. If we had titled this chapter “Organizing” instead of “Recruitment,” that would have given it the proper emphasis. We know organizers who are always surrounded by people because they instinctively draw people into their work. Other organizers function alone. Perhaps they are excellent at all the technical skills, but they don’t involve anyone. Indeed, they often consider members a bother, and seem to believe that the goal is to present the perfect testimony at a hearing, or to write the world’s finest press release. What such people do may be very valuable, but it isn’t organizing. Recruiting and involving people comes naturally to some, but all can learn to do it by incorporating the techniques outlined here. Of course, this isn’t
a contest to see how much work you can get out of doing, it is the way that organizations are built. More and more people take on more and more responsibility (including financial responsibility). This makes them feel that they own the organization and that it is the product of their efforts. The more that staff and leaders do for members, the less ownership the members feel and the less commitment they have. You can produce the best array of services, projects, activities, or publications for your members, but if they haven’t been involved in the planning, making it happen and paying for it, they will not understand what it takes to make an organization successful. They will take it all for granted and wonder why more hasn’t been done on their behalf.

**Basic Recruitment Principles**

This chapter discusses individual recruitment of members. Door-to-door canvassing, fundraising, and coalition building involve some of the same recruitment principles. Often, but not always, the first step in getting new people to do things is asking them to join. People want to join and to be active; they want to put time and effort and money into useful projects.

In 1832, when the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to chronicle life in the “New World,” he marveled at the way Americans set up voluntary organizations for every form of social betterment. “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations,” he observed. Comparing America to Europe, de Tocqueville noted that projects undertaken by the government in France, or the nobility in England, were done by citizens’ associations in America. This tradition is no less strong in America today.

Your job isn’t as hard as it may seem. You don’t have to figure out how to get people to be active, to care about their community, or to be concerned with larger issues. They are already doing that. Your job is mainly to make sure that your organization gets its share of all the volunteer activity that is going on. Yes, that requires a special skill but you don’t have to change human nature, it is already working with you on this one.

Once your group starts getting results you will have more members from among the ranks of those who wanted to be active, but stayed home because they thought that nothing they could do mattered. (Although most individuals are social beings and joiners by nature, there is no indication that organizations have the same innate tendency to join coalitions.)

**Appeal to People’s Self-Interest**

*If I am not for myself who is for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*

—Rabbi Hillel

Giving time, money, and loyalty to an organization involves giving so much of one’s self that saying it is motivated by self-interest seems not only a contradiction, but slightly mean. In fact, it is neither. People do the most selfless things out of self-interest, including joining unions, voting, inventing computer chips, and walking dogs. Indeed, self-interest generalized becomes class interest, and few things beat class interest for making history, but that is another story.

*If you want to move people, it has to be toward a vision that’s positive for them, that taps important values, that gets them something they desire, and it has to be presented in a compelling way that they feel inspired to follow.*

—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
By self-interest we don’t mean being selfish. The word interest comes from two Latin words *inter esse*, meaning to be between or among. So self-interest means self among others, or how we are aware of ourselves and our own needs in the context of our relationships with others.

When recruiting people, always appeal to their self-interest. This is very different from telling them why it is in your self-interest for them to help you. (In truth, there is a certain kind of person who just wants to help you but they usually want you to love them in return and they get jealous if you have more than three.) Self-interest takes several forms, which together with values, vision, and relationships underpin most organizational involvement:

*Personal.* People join organizations working on issues that personally affect them. Lower utility rates or lower taxes are examples of immediate self-interest, while global warming or disarmament exemplifies longer-term self-interest. People join to stop the oppression, prejudice, and discrimination that affect their lives. Such activities are often accompanied by the feeling that they are doing it for their children or grandchildren, which brings a kind of satisfaction beyond the issue itself.

Senior citizens often join groups for companionship and a desire to continue to be useful after retirement. They enjoy an opportunity to apply the skills of their former occupations or use talents they did not have time for while working. They often seek activities that are multigenerational, rather than confined to seniors. Then, there are people who volunteer for such additional social self-interest reasons as meeting people, making new friends with similar values, getting out of the house, taking a break from young children, just having fun, or even dating. A few people join for all of these reasons.

People also volunteer because organizations are fun. They are exciting, and particularly with direct action, very often a form of theater.

*Professional.* Many people volunteer for career self-interest reasons. They want to develop new skills that can enhance their resumes, or they want to test out possible new career options. They may want to make contacts that lead to jobs. Members of certain professions sometimes join organizations in the hope of finding clients. You will also meet people who are looking for work experience, such as students or homemakers trying to get back into the workplace. A chance to learn word processing or spreadsheets, which may be a chore for you, can be a real inducement for them.

*Power.* Some people volunteer for the power that comes from being part of an organization. They are interested in revenge against political crooks, bad landlords, and polluters of the environment. They enjoy the opportunity to be a spokesperson, to get on TV, or to speak at a rally. Some are considering running for office.

*Moral.* To sustain commitment, people must volunteer based on their values and vision. They believe that using their time to help bring justice to the world is the right thing to do. They think that “Faith without works is dead.” Many people feel that they have a civic responsibility to do something for their community, and that this is indeed a lifelong obligation, along with voting or paying taxes. In fact, moral values usually go along with all of the other reasons that people join groups. Moral values can be religious, ethical, or ideological.

*Negative Forms of Self-Interest.* A few individuals become identified with an organization in order to sellout for a price, to promote their own interests at the expense of the community, or
simply to provide themselves with an audience for crackpot ideas or abnormal behavior. Beware of such individuals. Once they become lodged in an organization it is very difficult to get them out without creating an atmosphere that drives away normal people.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, however, self-interest works on the side of the organization, and if you understand what it is that people desire, you can structure your recruitment appeal and your program to those particular things. Self-interest is rarely one-dimensional. People are motivated by combinations of needs, wants, and rewards. They join and stay with the organization that reflects their humanity and values and addresses specific forms of self-interest.

Fire a Shot Over the Water
Outreach needs to be built into every aspect of an issue campaign. An organization should be regularly doing things that raise its public visibility, and at the same time gives people an opportunity to join. In fact, in any place on any issue, there is some number of people who are actually looking for you.

Mark Twain, in writing about his boyhood on the Mississippi, spoke of the practice of firing a cannon over the water to raise the victims of drowning. Particularly at the beginning of a campaign, but also later on, the organization should fire a shot over the water to bring to the surface those who are just looking for a chance to participate. This takes the form of holding publicly advertised events such as hearings, teach-ins, accountability sessions, rallies, and marches. People will come to support the issue, but also to check out the group. Sign-in sheets and follow-up recruitment calls should be standard procedure. Putting up a web page is helpful but you need to publicize the address widely in conjunction with these other events.

Smaller activities also work well. Petition drives and letter-writing campaigns can bring the organization into contact with hundreds of people in a short time, and each person should be asked to volunteer. Experience indicates that if one out of ten who volunteer actually shows up, you are doing well. The point is to have an ongoing activity that generates a constant inflow of new people.

Recruit to an Activity, Not a Business Meeting
Most of the time we are looking for people who want to do something more than come to a business meeting. What organizer has not offered prayers to be saved from the person who says, “I have no time to do anything, but I’d love to help you make policy. When is your next meeting?” By recruiting to an activity, you get action-oriented people rather than chronic meeting-goers.

Some very successful organizations rely on a program of house meetings as their major outreach method. This is not at all the same as recruiting to a business meeting, and has produced dramatic results. House meetings are action oriented. Those attending hear a brief talk on the issue, then they are asked to write a letter, give money, and to sponsor a meeting in their own home. Some very useful techniques emerged in the recent election campaign where people at house meetings were sent a short video to watch and discuss. The video urged participation in an activity and the results were relayed back to the sponsoring organization via the internet. This can be done locally on a smaller scale with a minimum of technical skill and expense.

Have an Ongoing Entry Level Program for New People
A major obstacle to successful recruitment is that new people feel that they are arriving in the
The middle of the party. Everyone knows so much about the issues and has learned all the jargon. They can talk about the “bi-modal split,” “Mr. Pecker at C.H.A.,” the location of Part B of the 999 AD or “particulate matter per billion.” No one wants to be around folks who talk in code. It creates an instant in-group, with all the new people automatically excluded. For this reason, when you recruit new members it is important to involve them in something in which they can immediately feel useful. For example, one successful community organization maintained a regular program of weekend letter writing at street tables. Because the issue was very popular and the tables were highly successful, working at them was a fine entry-level activity. Anyone could do it. New volunteers worked as equals alongside the organization’s veterans. Passersby put dollar bills in the can, the weather was fine, and everyone felt good. Every letter writer was also asked to volunteer for an hour. They knew what would be expected of them because they saw the activity going on. They knew that they could successfully get others to write letters because they themselves had written one. Maintaining this operation required that several nights each week be spent contacting volunteers. Coming in and making calls was seen as a next step of organizational involvement. Although this particular issue campaign, stopping an interstate highway lasted for ten years before final victory, the outreach program ensured a small but steady stream of recruits.

Offer Child Care

Increasingly, the strongest volunteer programs in the country are addressing the obstacles to volunteering and adjusting to reach the changing face of volunteers. A key issue is childcare. Consider ways your organization can coordinate a childcare program at certain times to enable parents of small children to participate as active volunteers. Some volunteers may be interested in volunteering for childcare.

Your Image as a Recruiter

Because the best recruitment is done in person, your image is important. Try to look as much as possible like the people you are trying to recruit. If this is impossible, then try to look like someone they would want to bring home to dinner. (No, you do not have to wear the national costume of another culture unless it truly becomes you.) The rule of thumb on appearance is that people shouldn’t be able to remember what you looked like. Remembering, regardless of whether it was good or bad, means that your appearance distracted from the message instead of blending in with it.

“What did that young man in the three piece suit want?”

“You mean the young man in the pin stripe and red tie?”

“Yes, the one with the crimson pocket handkerchief and the $700 pair of alligator Berluti shoes.”

“I don’t know, he said something about the world coming to an end. I didn’t really get it. The handkerchief clashed with the tie.”

Of course, eye contact is important, and language, like dress, should be appropriate, but the rules for many of these things change with the constituency you are organizing. In some ethnic communities averting the eyes, not eye contact, is a sign of respect. So do what everyone else does. However, you must still be yourself. The goal is to adopt the behavior and customs that help you gain acceptance, but don’t try to “become” the people you are organizing.
Sound confident by knowing the subject, but don’t try to impress with a blizzard of facts. Most important, be enthusiastic. This will happen naturally if you are recruiting to an important activity. Convey urgency. Avoid starting with history. Don’t say:

“Our organization was formed in 2008, because in 2006 the City Council passed a master development plan for the year 2015. In section III (b) there was a major flaw which wasn’t noticed until 2007 during the Streetfogle Commission hearings when....”

Instead, start with the main point. “They are building a sewage treatment plant right in this community, and our homes won’t be worth...!”

Practice explaining your organization’s issue in a concise, up-beat fashion. In a few sentences, you should be able to convey the essence of the organization, the issue, and how you intend to win. Having a clear message is as important for recruiting people as it is for speaking to the media.

**Six Steps toward Successful Recruitment**

1. **Be Prepared**

Recruitment requires solid preparation. Have in your mind how you will explain your goal and what you want the person to do. Consider areas of self-interest to which you will appeal. Have a few fallback requests as well. These are jobs that need to be done, but require less of a commitment: “If you can’t chair the newsletter committee, can you help with the layout? Of course we can list you on the masthead, layout and design by....”

When you are acquainted with your potential recruit, review what you know about the person, his or her interests and experience, past activities, family, and anything else that will help you identify self-interest. If this is a “cold contact,” someone you have never met and don’t know anything about, then prepare some questions to bring up in the conversation that will get the person talking about him or herself. Look for visual clues, for example, parents of small children always have stains on their clothing. This can lead you into a discussion of day care, baby sitting, schools, taxes, playgrounds, traffic lights, crime, housing, and almost anything else. You might observe that a person’s clothing is covered with cat hair. This leads to a more limited range of social issues.

If you are recruiting an organization to join a coalition, research its history and program. Know its funding sources and tax status.

Whether recruiting an individual or an organization you should approach the first meeting as if it is the beginning of what you hope will be a long-term relationship. You really want to get to know the individual and bring them into the organization in a way that benefits both them and the organization. Preparing for the meeting with this mindset will help shape your recruitment strategy.

2. **Legitimize Yourself**

Particularly with people you don’t know, you need to gain quick credibility. There are several ways to do this.

First, if it is true, explain that you are from the same community, workplace, school, ethnic group or whatever the appropriate division is, and that you have the same problem that they do. It is important to show that you are not using their problem to advance some other agenda (e.g., “We can get this toxic dump cleaned up if all functions of government are assumed by one big industrial union of all workers regardless of craft.”)

Second, be able to say that you got the person’s name from a mutual friend, church leader, or public figure in the community who suggested that you contact him or her.
If you garnered names from online petitions, thank the individual for signing and introduce yourself as a member of the organization that circulated the petition. Tell how it was successfully used.

Third, mention other people on the block (in the office, in the community, etc.) who have already agreed to join, sign, or come to the event.

Last, remind people that they really have heard of your organization. You were the group that blocked McDonald's from coming in.

A key part of your recruitment strategy is explaining why that person’s participation will make a difference. What is the unique role they can play that someone else can’t? Even if it is just a matter of boosting turnout, explain why turnout is important. "Representative Smith only won by 150 votes. If 76 votes had gone the other way, she would have lost. We need 76 people who voted for her to get up and say that they are now ready to switch. We have 75. Will you do it?" (OK, so things really aren’t made to order like this, but you get the idea.)

3. Listen

Think long term relationship! Draw people out, identify their self-interest, clarify their concerns, and establish rapport. If you are whizzing along telling your story, you won’t be able to do any of this. Listening is how you get information and show your concern. It is not simply the absence of talking, it is asking people good questions, and providing encouraging remarks and body language to convey your interest in them. It is also polite.

Listen to the response when you legitimize yourself. If you mentioned a person, what was the reaction to that name? If you mentioned a past campaign of your group’s, had the person really heard of it? If you feel that you are not connecting, ask an open-ended question like “How long have you lived in the neighborhood? What changes have you seen?” Or ask about children or grandchildren.

Other things to listen for include special skills the person might have, useful contacts, and organizational networks such as a civic club or synagogue. Perhaps a meeting can be arranged for you.

4. Agitate

When you agitate, you are trying, as Webster’s defines the word, “to stir up people so as to produce changes.” You are not trying to offend or be obnoxious, but neither will you passively accept excuses for people not getting involved.

When someone says, “Oh well, I don’t like the idea of a gas pipeline coming through here, but it has to go someplace, and we all have to accept these things. That’s progress.” Then you agitate by saying: “Yes, but it was originally designed to go through vacant land that happened to belong to a wealthy contributor to U.S. Senator Jones. The contributor went to Jones, who leaned on the gas company to move the pipeline into our neighborhood. That guy didn’t think it was progress, and he’s a millionaire, so he should know. Here is the clipping that tells the whole story.”

By agitating, you make people angry. Not only is the thing bad, but it’s unfair. You say: “No, schools are not closing all over town, just in certain places. There are schools with far fewer students than we have that will stay open because those communities have more pull than we do. Is that fair to our kids?”

5. Get a Commitment

Don’t leave a conversation open-ended. Get a commitment. Remember, you are trying to match the organization’s needs to the person’s self-interest and talents. If you can’t get an actual
agreement, at least try for a date by which the person will decide. If you do get an agreement, it should be to do a specific thing on a specific day. Write it down. Make a note to call and remind the person. Clarify what will happen next, who will call, who will drop off the materials, and when the briefing will be.

6. Follow Up

Nothing impresses people more than timely follow-up, because few of us actually do it. Make sure that your administrative systems are in place to keep track of people and get back to them as scheduled. When people you recruited do come to an event or meeting, be sure to greet them and introduce them around. There is nothing worse than making a big fuss over people while recruiting them, and then ignoring them when they actually show up. If you worked on turnout for an event, try to free yourself from logistical responsibilities on that day so that you can pay attention to the new people. Write the names of those you really want to spend time with on an index card and keep it in your pocket. Refer to it throughout the event and seek out those you listed. It is too easy to get caught up talking to old friends and acquaintances and ignore the newcomers.

**Tips on Keeping Volunteers**

Recruitment has to be backed up by an organizational plan, with clear goals and expectations of what volunteers will do. For this to work, training and supervision are needed. People should be set to work as soon as they arrive, but first, take the time to explain the organizational importance of the task and how it fits into winning on the issue. Ask people how long they can stay and assign tasks accordingly. Never allow people to feel that you wasted their time, or didn’t really need them. Have a variety of things to do. Provide coffee. Celebrate birthdays of office regulars. Bring in champagne to toast even small victories. Provide ways that those who want to can move up in the structure of the organization, and don’t high-pressure those who are happy with the level they are at. Maintain regular volunteer hours at different times of the day. Keep the schedule the same so that people can plan around it. Thank people and give public recognition. Don’t look disappointed when they go home. In short, make an evening in the office more interesting than staying home and watching TV. A very serious problem with professionally staffed organizations is that they tend to close their offices at five o’clock. Organizers work much later, but there is often no central place where people can come regularly in the evening or on weekends. A successful volunteer program really means that the paid staff needs to be working when other people are off from work.

**Practice Makes Perfect**

At the Midwest Academy, students often role play situations in which they recruit people. Consider having your staff and leaders practice on one another. Work on a few opening lines because getting started is the hardest part. Don’t forget, most normal conversations begin by talking about the weather, sports, kids, or some other everyday subject. Practice answers to typical questions that you will be asked. If you can’t adequately explain the program in role playing, consider the possibility that you don’t have a recruitment problem, but an organizational problem, because your program, solution, or strategy really isn’t clear enough to appeal to anyone.

Recruitment is the lifeblood of an organization. What kills groups fastest is that they stop recruiting new people. Growing, thriving organizations must train staff and leaders on how to recruit others and build recruitment strategies into their ongoing program work.