



Tilling the Soil: Cultivating Organizer Learning and Growth



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A Note from the Authors

When we first began the Organizer Learning Project our ambitions were limited. We launched the project to explore how organizers learn—the learning practices and ways of knowing that support their growth and development. Each of us brings more than 20 years of experience working alongside community organizers and grassroots organizations to develop meaningful learning projects that demonstrate the value and impact of organizing practice. Two of us worked as organizers in the early part of our career, at a time when the field was going through dramatic shifts, much like today. In our work as learning partners, we often have served as translators and boundary spanners between organizers and funders in an attempt to bring together a shared understanding of how organizing works and why organizers’ approaches and priorities are essential for success. We saw an opportunity to use our unique vantage point to elevate their learning practices and share these lessons with philanthropy, evaluators, researchers, and others to reimagine how those actors can better support organizer learning.

As we engaged with organizers over the past two years, our focus shifted. We expanded the lens of this project to address the broader question of how organizers develop the craft and what makes a difference in that growth. We realized that keeping a narrow focus on learning practices would mean missing the larger story that organizers were telling us—how they became an organizer and the people and experiences that were instrumental to that growth. As organizers invited us into their journeys, we were driven to honor and make visible the alchemy of organizing and the joyful, rigorous, and, at times, heartbreaking process of becoming an organizer. This insight is the basis for this report, and what we hope you will take with you as you read.

We are profoundly grateful to the people and organizations who have walked alongside us and invested in this project over the past few years:

- The California Endowment and Hahn Cao Yu for seeing the contributions this work could make to the organizing field and investing in its success.
- Francis Calpotura and In-Advance for your enthusiastic thought partnership, guidance, and support in facilitating the learning conversations.
- The 75 organizers who offered their stories, experiences, and wisdom throughout the learning and meaning-making conversations. It was an honor to learn from you, and it is our greatest hope that you see yourself and your journeys reflected in this report.

The organizers, teachers, and mentors who came before us inspired our commitment to organizing and guided our paths in understanding the craft. Thank you for accompanying us, for the gifts of your wisdom, and for nurturing our growth in the practice.

With gratitude,

Katie Fox, Gigi Barsoum, and Margaret Post



Introduction

Community organizing has always been at the nexus of crisis and change. Addressing today's economic inequality and rising poverty, polarized politics, racial violence, and the climate crisis requires solutions that produce long-term and sustainable change, grounded in the needs and imaginations of the individuals and communities who are most directly impacted. Community organizers reweave the civic fabric of our societies, bringing together individuals and communities for collective action. Organizers reimagine and recreate the world around us, they cultivate the leadership of individuals most impacted by injustice and inequity, they nurture this leadership into public action, they challenge and confront oppressive systems, and they build organizations that endure as they contest for power.

Organizers are relational and visionary. They are strategists and tacticians, dreamers and realists. They break through fear, apathy, and isolation, supporting individuals to emerge as powerful actors, connected in community with others who share values, interests, and hopes for the future. Organizers believe in worlds that seem impossible, and through their slow, steady work, these worlds become probable and real.

Community organizing is a challenging and important vocation. But as multiple recent reports and articles have articulated (*see Appendix C*), the organizing field is struggling to build and sustain organizers. Turnover is high, and the past ten years have seen experienced organizers depart the field en masse, leaving a dearth of senior organizers and mentors who can train the next generation. Rebuilding the ranks of organizers requires the field to strengthen, expand, and reimagine how to grow, nourish, and sustain organizers.

In this report we make visible what it takes to become an organizer. We explore the intensive process that organizers go through to learn about the community and context in which they organize and about who they are in the work. For two years, we engaged with over 75 organizers hailing from different geographic areas and organizing traditions, with varied positions and longevity in the organizing field, representing a wide range of identities and communities. Storytelling, relationships, and experiential learning are core to organizing and often how organizers share and pass down practices and lessons. We sought to honor this tradition, trusting the wisdom of organizers as the guides for our inquiry. As we spoke with them about the moments and people who have made a difference in their growth, we came to see an arc of development unfolding in the story's organizers shared with us and in dialogue with each other. Their stories illuminated not just how and what they learned, but the evolution of their learning and growth throughout their organizing careers and in the relationships and experiences that have shaped them and kept them in the field.

The phases of organizer growth that we illustrate in this report encapsulate the evolution of the craft of organizing. With imagery from plant biology, we depict the progression of an organizer's development from the seeds of their first encounters with community organizing as a tool for social change, to the vibrantly blooming high points in their careers as practitioners of the craft. We explore three dimensions of the craft that organizers develop throughout the phases and the nutrients that foster growth, with special attention to the relationships and experiences that facilitate learning. We describe the dynamics in which organizers

discovered and embraced inner knowledge of themselves, the communities around them, and the broader contexts of injustice and power they seek to confront in their work.

While the information we share about organizer development is interesting in itself, from the beginning, our intention for the Organizer Learning Project has been to nurture action. As we shared early findings with organizers, it became clear that our framing of the phases of organizer development, the dimensions of learning, and the nutrients for growth not only resonates with their experiences, but also provides a pathway for better supporting organizers, building more durable organizations, and strengthening the broader field. It offers a lens through which we can see opportunities for intervention, support, and action. We envision this report as a grounding resource that is designed to sow conversations with organizers, national organizing networks and trainers, funders, researchers, and evaluators about how we can all improve support for organizer growth and learning.

To that end, consider this a call to action. As you read this report, we invite you to reflect on your role and the power you hold to promote organizer growth and development. Whether you are an organizer yourself, train and develop organizers, fund organizing, or conduct research and evaluation, how can you create the conditions that catalyze and support the full range of experiences and relationships that organizers need to grow?

What is a “Community Organizer”?

- Community organizers do the day-to-day work of engaging a group of people who share common values and interests to stand together and take collective action to advance shared goals.
- Community organizers hold a vision for the “world as it can be” and are committed to developing leaders who act together to challenge and change systems of oppression and injustice.
- Community organizers build relationships and organizations. They cultivate leadership, analyze power, devise strategy, plan campaigns, and take action with their core constituencies.
- Community organizers are not a monolithic group. Organizing is a craft, and how organizers learn is shaped by their context, values, and background.

Overview of the Report

The four sections of this report are woven together in the image of perennial plants. We came to this image through an iterative process of dialogue, analysis, and reflection with participants and with each other. Inspired by the perennial garden of one of the authors, this image guides our framing of organizer development through cycles of learning and growth and within conditions that shape who they are and what they learn about the practices of organizing and the world around them.

Perennial plants are known for strong and deep root systems, hearty stems and leaves, and vibrant blooms that return year after year. Perennials are versatile and tolerate variable conditions with the capacity to regenerate and spread with the turn of the seasons. Different varieties of perennials are often interconnected, co-existing with interlocking roots that nourish and support each other. Through cycles of growth and dormancy, perennials are persistent, tenacious, and steadfast plants that endure over time. Much like perennial plants, community organizers have strong roots that originated from a seed. With unique versatility, organizers grow and change in variable conditions, their root systems strengthen and expand, and they bring vibrant blooms to fruition that then produce new seeds to spread.

Centering this image, we illustrate the phases, dimensions, and nutrients of organizer growth across four sections:



Section one introduces the **five phases of organizer growth**. We describe each phase and illustrate the arc of an organizer’s development, leaning into what organizers shared about the emotion and experience of each phase.



The second section explores the **three dimensions of organizer learning**—what organizers learn as they move through the phases, including about the discipline, about themselves, and about the world around them.



In the third section, we share lessons about the **vital nutrients in an organizer’s development**—the relationships and experiences that organizers identified as making a substantial difference in their growth.



We conclude with our **reflections on the opportunities** that the organizing field, philanthropy, and the evaluation and research sectors can consider as they grapple with how to better tend to organizer learning and growth.



I. Phases of Organizer Growth

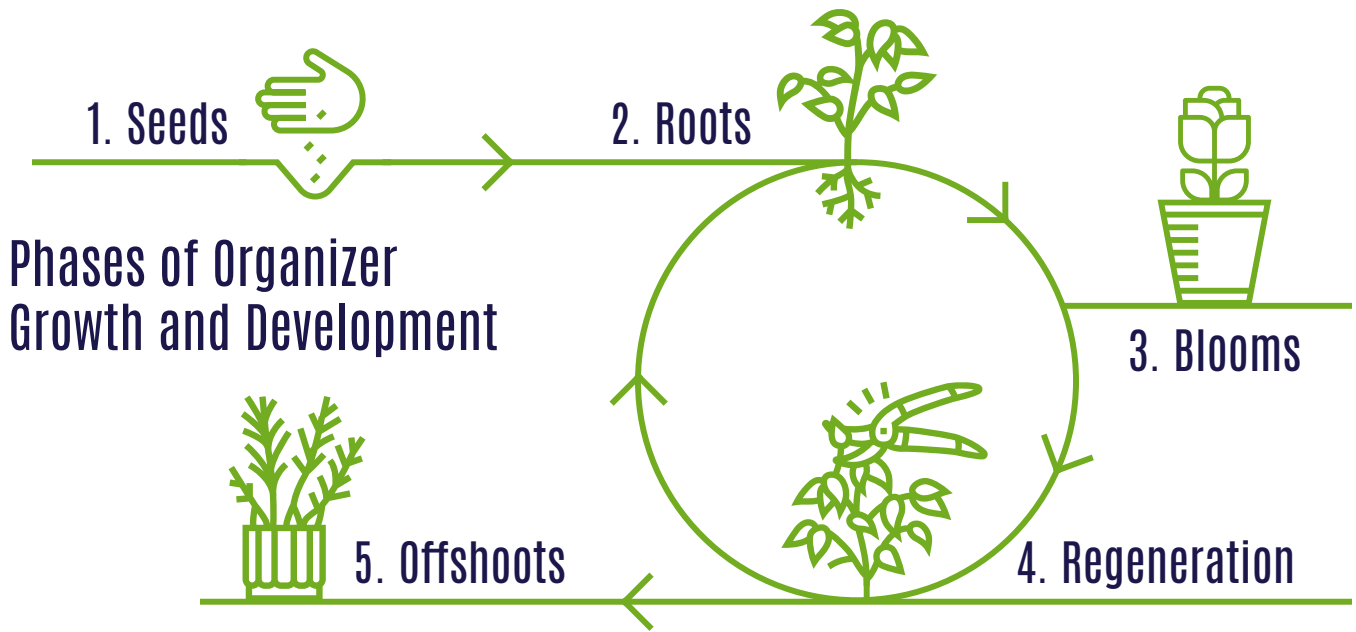
The Phases of Organizer Growth reflect a pattern that is similar to the life cycle of a perennial plant. As we listened to organizers' stories about how and in what contexts they learn, we recognized a pattern of significant and defining moments of growth from their first encounter with organizing (seeds), to their formation (roots), to the highlights of their careers (blooms and offshoots). The phases described below capture these moments and illustrate the evolving, cyclical, and dynamic nature of organizer development. Moving in and through the phases is an ongoing process of navigating dynamics that support or impede their growth. From seed, to root, to stem, bloom, offshoot, and in the time of regeneration, an organizer's development unfolds as their skill and capacity grows.

Reflecting on and describing these phases and the experiences organizers shared within each enhanced our appreciation of the organizers' journeys and all that they hold. But we believe the phases also provide a framework for identifying opportunities for capacity and infrastructure that supports organizers to move from one phase to the next. As you read through the phases, consider where you see gaps and opportunities in your organization and the field. What phases could use more attention and investment?

Assumptions About the Phases of Organizer Growth

As with any concept, how we describe the phases is guided by a set of assumptions:

- Each phase is dynamic and fluid, like waves that ebb and flow.
- The phases have porous boundaries, and they are not limited by a specific time frame, set of experiences, or employment status in one organization.
- The phases are cyclical, iterative, and at times overlapping as an organizer grows into new opportunities and roles.
- The phases build from and with one another. They may be bidirectional as an organizer learns about themselves, grows in the practice, and develops relationships with and in community.



Phases of Organizer Growth and Development

PHASE 1: Seeds

In this foundational stage a future organizer’s sense of what is possible for change ignites. The seed is planted and begins to germinate. Prior to this phase, organizers describe having a keen awareness and, often, lived experience of injustice. They feel called or compelled to affect change in the world but are searching for a way to do that. “Growing up, I wanted to make a difference ... I saw the school to prison pipeline, and I was trying to find my place.” This phase is an entry-point that sparks their interest and curiosity about organizing.

Many organizers describe first-hand experiences participating in or observing a collective action or organizing effort. They are invited into a moment by family, friends, mentors, or community members where they witness the power of organizing. Through these opportunities, future organizers begin to see the value and potential of organizing and collective action. While they may not know exactly what organizing is, they are now aware of what can happen when you bring people together—the power you can build and wield to affect change.

These experiences inspire new imaginings and visions for the future, their community, and the world around them. In this phase, organizers begin to see that collective power is critical for change, and they make the choice to explore and pursue what is possible in an organizing career. Throughout their career, organizers can encounter seeds that rejuvenate their interest in organizing.

Examples of “Seeds”

- **Participating in mass mobilizations and collective actions**, such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and immigration actions. “Seeing what people power looks like, what strength in numbers means was really eye-opening for me. I remember seeing hundreds and hundreds of people outside City Hall ... And seeing what solidarity looked like, seeing what strength in numbers looked like, I still remember to this day, it was such an inspiring moment for me as a young person.”
- **Observing and accompanying loved ones doing organizing.** “My grandpa was the first Black elected official I knew, the first person I ever knocked doors for ... He’s the person that taught me organizing and what does it mean when Black folks have agency and autonomy? How a community has the opportunity to be well when the folks who make it up actually get to determine what power looks like and how power is negotiated and spent.”
- **Having a community member or mentor invite them into the work.** “A man who was an adjunct professor at the school, was also organizing on the side, was a Waffle House manager. He saw just a group of us at a protest and he really invested in, saw something in us, and gave us an opportunity to continue to organize.”



PHASE 2: Roots

In this phase, organizers begin to establish the roots that provide a sturdy foundation for their organizing. They get their first taste of what it means to be an organizer and start to develop the fundamental skills and relationships that undergird their practice. Organizers describe their experience of this phase as “drinking out of a fire hose.” Like new plants that may weather spring rains, summer heat, or early frosts, organizers have a diverse and intense array of experiences and emotions in this phase as they absorb new skills, explore their own self-interest and story, and build relationships in their organization and community.



How do organizers describe feeling in this phase?*

- Overwhelmed
- Lonely
- Motivated
- Excited
- Isolated
- Confused
- Fulfilled
- Connected to self
- More confident
- Imposter
- Powerful
- Scrambling
- Grasping at straws

* We intentionally asked organizers how each phase felt and the emotions they experienced in each phase. The emotions listed here include the full range of feelings organizers shared.

The learning curve for organizers during this phase is steep as they learn about the community organizing field, the day-to-day responsibilities of an organizer, who they are in the work, as well as the community and world around them. In this phase, organizers develop concrete skills and are exposed to the “art and science” of organizing. They gain awareness of their personal story and how it influences and connects to their organizing approach. They develop relationships with community members, peers, mentors, and supervisors who will play important roles in their development.

Organizers’ growth at this point is multi-faceted and broad. This phase provides the groundwork for an organizers’ career and forms the foundation for organizers’ continued growth and development. If perennial roots are damaged early on in their planting, it can be difficult to establish robust roots, take in water, and absorb nutrients. Similarly, organizers may struggle to be well-rooted, firmly established, and move forward on solid ground if this foundational time is marked with a lack of useful and supportive training and relationships, excessive conflict, or organizational turmoil.

Organizers can revisit the Roots phase at different points in their career, notably when they move to a new organization or community or begin a new role. While they may have a foundational set of skills and relationships that help them transition, they may again feel overwhelmed as they build new relationships, learn new organizing approaches, or gain new responsibilities. Like pruned back or transplanted perennials, it takes time to re-establish roots, even while drawing on the learned wisdom from the past.

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If your formation at the beginning of your organizing journey is off kilter, then that shapes the way that you see everything else in your organizing journey. Formation can put you in a place where your regeneration is purely about the burnout. Thinking about the root causes that might get folks to a place where this work isn’t lifelong work for them for whatever reason and how does development play a role in that pipeline? There are people that I love that aren’t organizing anymore. A lot of it largely because they didn’t have the development and formation that they needed.

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PHASE 3: Blooms

This phase is when organizers thrive. They have a well-established understanding of the practice, and they approach organizing with increased autonomy and confidence. The foundation of skills and experience they gained in the Roots phase matures into sturdy stems and leaves with vibrant blooms—in themselves, with their leaders and communities, and in their organizations. Their organizing practice becomes embodied and intuitive, and they make it their own. In the Blooms phase, organizers know—and have experienced—what it

takes to build and wield power. They can weather changing conditions that are both predictable and uncertain, with trust that there will be time, space, and capacity to nurture new leaves and blooms.

In this phase, organizers have a deep well of skills, relationships, and experiences. “I understand what power building looks like because I have felt it and done it, which means I can duplicate it.” As their experience and craft matures, organizers find themselves growing in ways that increase their confidence and effectiveness.

- **Honing their distinctive approach to organizing.**

In the Roots phase, organizers begin connecting their personal story and background to their organizing approach. As they master the fundamentals and gain experience, organizers get clear on their value and power and find their own style and unique way of being in the work.

- **Stepping into leadership.** Organizers take on new leadership—supervising, mentoring, or training other organizers; running campaigns; or taking on organization management responsibilities. New organizers and community members look to organizers in this phase for guidance. Organizers are “leading with an authority” that they did not previously have.

- **Developing their ability to intuit and assess opportunities, threats, context, and when to pivot.** At this point, organizers have a wealth of experiences and a sense of ease with the fundamentals. This enables them to “listen to their gut,” be more intentional and strategic, and take risks and experiment with new approaches and tactics. Organizers can push themselves outside of their comfort zone and stretch their capacity. “It’s exciting to feel like you have the foundation of organizing from which you can innovate and be more creative.”

In the Blooms phase organizers see their experiences, skills, and relationship-building come to fruition. They have seen what works and does not. They envision bolder campaigns, adapt methods to strengthen their approach, and have more curiosity and openness about others’ work and what it can teach them in theirs. They are no longer just observing the power and potential of organizing as they did during the Seeds phase—they are making it happen themselves.

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This was at the height of my career when I had started to really move things that felt more aligned with what I wanted to do. It was during that time that I was able to really hone in on how I would be able to move leaders and develop them around something that they really cared about. I think that was the time that I mobilized the most members ... This is the point at which I learned a lot about myself and organizing and perfecting the craft.

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How do organizers describe feeling in this phase?

- Powerful
- Excited
- Confident
- Thrilled
- Comfortable

While organizers describe this as a high point and time of flourishing, some organizers describe experiencing new tensions and frustrations in their organizing during this phase. As organizers develop their own organizing vision and approach and have greater comfort with risk and experimentation, they learn that other factors, like funding requirements, risk aversion, and limited resources, affect how they can organize —“it can feel like the work is being bottlenecked.”



PHASE 4: Regeneration

There are times in their career when organizers find themselves in need of regeneration. This phase is a pivot point for organizers. For plants, regeneration is catalyzed by changing seasons, shifting temperatures, and the cyclical need to lie dormant through cold and snow. It is a time of pruning back and letting go. While the stem, leaves, and blooms may die, hearty roots remain, resting and preparing for a new time of emergence, growth, and blooming.

Organizers in this phase may experience a disturbance in their career and growth. They are unsure about their future in organizing and are searching for a reason to stay in the field. They question whether all the long hours have been worth it, if organizing is still relevant, if it is still the right job for them. Organizers may feel unmotivated, uninspired, or directionless. For some organizers, these feelings were catalyzed by a specific event such as a campaign loss or staff turnover or an emerging awakening or observation about the field or themselves that has grown over time. “There’s just periods where you kind of get bored with things. And part of it is when you’re in a place too long, and you can’t see the possibility anymore.”

Some organizers will leave the field at this point. Other organizers come through this phase recommitted to organizing and reoriented to themselves, their communities, and organizations. The organizers who recommitted described having experiences that gave them a new perspective, inspired them, and reminded them about why they love organizing. Many of the organizers who moved through this phase recalled experiences that allowed them to step away from their organization or community for a period of time.



How do organizers describe feeling in this phase?

- Frustrated
- Unsettled
- Uninspired
- Out of love with organizing
- Scarcity
- Discomfort
- Unable to see the forest for the trees
- Wanting to set it all on fire
- Bored
- Directionless

They returned from these experiences reinvigorated and ready to re-engage in the work.

While many of the organizers who described significant experiences of regeneration were many years into their career, others experienced smaller regeneration moments where they questioned themselves or the work. In both cases, it was helpful for organizers to be able to step back and out for a period of time to reset and recommit.

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It helped me stir my imagination, and better understand what good organizing looks like. So, I think for me, this particular moment in my career was important because I needed to step out of my context, and see myself and see the work differently.

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Experiences that Helped Organizers Regenerate:

- Getting inspiration and agitation from a mentor, peer, or movement elders
- Trying another form or approach to organizing, e.g., labor or electoral organizing
- Attending a week-long leadership training
- Spending several months to a year or two organizing in a different community or with a different organization
- Starting a new organization
- Having a sabbatical or extended time off of work



PHASE 5: Offshoots

Unlike the Regeneration phase that reorients organizers and propels them back to full-time organizing, organizers in Phase Five move away or fully step back from the day-to-day practice of organizing. Like the offshoots of a plant, these organizers grow in new directions or are transplanted, taking with them the lessons and learnings of their organizing experiences. Branching beyond day-to-day organizing practice can take many forms and move in many directions, as individuals grow up and out from their foundational organizer experience.

Some organizers have reached the end of their careers and are ready to retire. Others remain committed to organizing, but shift to supportive positions in adjacent fields like philanthropy, research and teaching, consulting and training, and other community or national nonprofit organizations. Some may initiate

projects that respond differently to the needs and priorities of the community they love. Organizers may transition from leadership positions into part-time, advisory, or mentoring roles. They may be outside of ongoing organizing work, yet they remain connected to the community of organizers and organizations of which they have been a part.

Organizers in the Offshoots phase are typically known as a resource to the field, either because of their long experience and wisdom, or because they have moved into a position that allows them to continue to support organizers and the development of the field. When an organizer branches beyond, they can contribute to the field through training, coaching, and strategy support. They share their knowledge and experience with younger organizers and serve as guides and mentors, both formal and informal. They are open to accompanying other organizers, sharing or passing on their knowledge and experience to others in the field, and bringing out the best in others to improve organizing practice.

Some organizers at this phase take on the notable role of a “sage.” A sage is one who has attained insight and wisdom through their organizing experience and reflection, and who others look to for guidance, advice, encouragement, and support. Many organizers make a lifelong commitment to the craft of organizing. As they grow and change throughout their career, these organizers develop embodied wisdom about the practice and have extensive knowledge of organizing’s art and science, about what works, what does not, where the challenges are and how to navigate through the inevitable obstacles and pitfalls. They have refined their craft; they have built and sustained relationships in communities and organizations; and they have witnessed and experienced the ebbs and flows of wins and losses.

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At some point you say, ‘enough already.’ In the last year, I’ve been more responding to requests than actively seeking stuff ... That’s kind of fun because I really get to pick and choose ... I’ve gotten much better about saying ‘no’ to some things ... Keeping current on what’s happening and not getting mired down. Really living that and not getting stuck.

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Sages have shifted from accumulating to discerning and sharing important aspects of the work. They have a developed sense of intuition in the craft of organizing through, what are now, lifelong experiences (“battle scars and victories”) and relationships. They are looking back and looking ahead, envisioning what comes next for future generations. In the arc of an organizer’s development, this is a time of passing on learning and insight, of discerning what has and has not worked in the past, and what can endure about the craft of organizing.

Activities for Organizers in the Offshoots Phase:

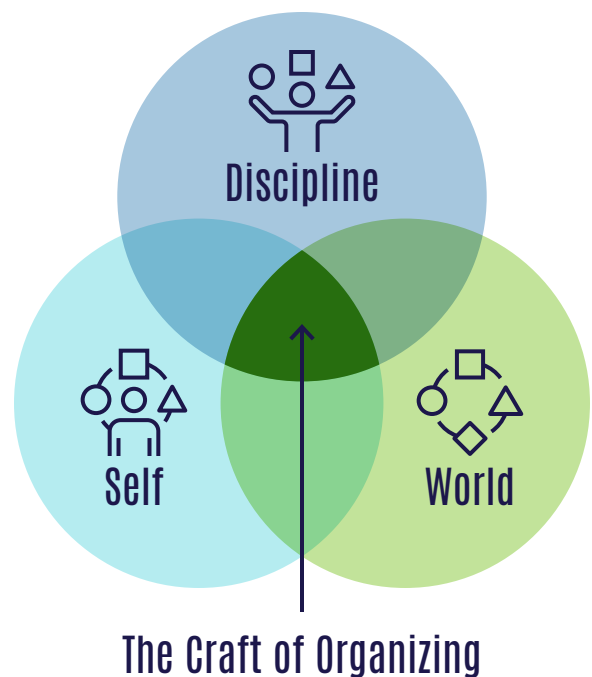
- Mentoring the next generation of organizers
- Leading trainings
- Facilitating funding opportunities
- Supporting strategy development as consultants
- Providing commentary and perspective on where the field is and where it is going through writing, speaking at trainings and events, and convening groups for shared learning



II. What Organizers Learn: About the Discipline, the Self, and the World Around Them

As organizers move through the phases of growth, they learn along three dimensions: 1) the discipline—the art and science of organizing, 2) the self—their personal story and beliefs that shape and influence their organizing, and 3) their community and the world around them. Learning about and practicing the discipline, exploring and reflecting on the self, and building a deep well of understanding and instinct about the community and the world are the cornerstones of the craft. They support organizers to acquire the skills, intuition, empathy, and self-awareness that they need to be effective. Honing this knowledge is a career-long endeavor that runs throughout the five phases of growth.

The multi-dimensional nature of organizer learning was a much-discussed topic in our conversations with organizers. While the three dimensions of learning will be familiar to organizers, we believe there is value in making them explicit and articulating the importance of each. There is a tendency to focus investment and capacity on the most visible and concrete dimension of learning—supporting organizers to learn the discipline of organizing. However, the three dimensions are interdependent and interwoven throughout the phases. An organizer cannot be strong in the art and science of organizing without also having a clear and nuanced understanding of themselves and the world around them and vice versa. To support organizer growth, we need to provide structures and supports for organizers to develop all three.



About the Discipline: Learning the “Art” and “Science” of Organizing

While people may enter the field with a strong interest in organizing, it is not uncommon for new organizers to begin this work without a clear idea of what that means. Starting in the Roots phase, organizers gain a more refined understanding of what organizing is and what it is not. They begin to learn the discipline of organizing—the habits and practices of everyday work—the science and art of organizing. To organizers “the science is the hard skills,” core concepts, tactics, theories, and what participants described as “organizer math” that are building blocks of organizing.

However, as one organizer explained, “none of the science matters without the art part of this.” What constitutes the art of organizing is less tangible.

The art of organizing shows up strongly in how organizers build and navigate relationships with community members, develop leaders, and grow the “committed collective.” Organizers learn to listen intently and draw out community members’ “magic and light” and self-interests. They learn to knit those individual talents, skills, and concerns together with the broader interests and goals of the community. At its heart, the “art is understanding that the work is actually deeply emotional and relational.” It is the ability to meet people where they are and to sense the questions and potential agitation they need.

Organizers also described the art as having the ability to shift and adjust in a way that still holds a bigger vision and goals—“the DIY of it all” as one organizer said. To do this, organizers underscored the need to understand campaign strategy and power, have the ability to analyze situations and identify opportunities, marshal resources, and frame opportunities and strategies in the context of systems transformation.

The line between the art and science of organizing is not clear-cut. One organizer described the science as giving organizers a roadmap. It clues them into the key landmarks and basic route they need to take. The art allows them to navigate obstacles and recalculate their route. Organizing magic lives in bringing them together, a process of learning that evolves throughout one’s career.

What Helps Organizers Learn the Science

- Trainings
- Written manuals and guides
- Shadowing experienced organizers
- Study and research of organizing efforts

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Everyone has complicated lives and people have complicated politics, and their politics are not always necessarily aligned with our organizations. When I started to be able to ask a lot of questions, really hear the answers, and felt comfortable really pushing back, that’s when I got more confidence and better at this.

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What Helps Organizers Learn the Art

- Doing and repeatedly practicing the skills
- Shadowing experienced organizers
- Getting feedback and coaching from supervisors, mentors, and experienced organizers
- Seeing organizing in other contexts, other models

About the Self: Learning Who You Are in the Work

Organizing is inherently centered on community values, interests, needs, and priorities. Focusing on the self can seem at odds with organizing. But as organizers say, “the first revolution is internal.” Core to becoming an organizer is understanding your own self-interest and personal story and how that connects to and influences your organizing. There is an ongoing interplay between the organizer’s personal experience and their practice.

In the Roots phase, organizers build their self-confidence and self-trust, and begin to comprehend their own power. Many organizers are drawn to organizing as a way of confronting the systems and structures that negatively impact people’s lives, including their own. The organizers we engaged raised numerous examples of confronting their own origin stories, personal experiences, and feelings of doubt and insecurity as they learned to organize. To be effective in organizing communities, they first had to reckon with how those oppressive systems have shaped their own realities and beliefs. Mentors, supervisors, and peers are often critical in helping organizers reflect on and confront their personal stories and bring that internal work into their organizing. Having someone who is invested in them helps organizers over time to “strip back the layers that are so deeply protected.”

Developing self-knowledge improves organizers’ ability to empathize and connect more fully with the people they organize and what they experience in the world. Understanding that “our self-interest is intertwined” opens them up to mentorship and being in close, accountable relationships to their communities. Knowing their own heritage, background, stories, and motivations acts as a touchstone for organizers. It is something they return to when feeling doubt, fear, or burn out.

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We know how the forces of racial capitalism shape our external reality, but it actually shapes our behavior and our attitudes and beliefs, to keep us powerless, especially in the South where I am ... I think something that’s very common among our base is that we’re taught from an early age that when we show up powerful, when we’re opinionated, when we are angry, when we actually express our full selves, we are rejected in some form. These behaviors aren’t necessarily inherent. They’re a form of disorganizing us against our self-interest.

Sharing my story gave me the outlet and tools to begin shedding some of that shame that I had about being an immigrant, being poor, and feeling less than because of it. And it transformed my organizing. Like I built a base because of this, right? Because people were able to then see themselves reflected in me and my story, and it gave me the confidence, honestly, to keep organizing.

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What Helps Organizers Learn About Themselves

- Space for self-reflection
- Accompaniment by and agitation and reflection with mentors, supervisors, and peers

About the World Around Them: Learning Who You Are in Community and in the World

As organizers explore their own stories and learn about their self-interest, they also begin to grapple with who they are in their community and in the world around them. As one organizer shared, “love for community is at the heart of organizing.” While some organizers come from and have a long history with the community they organize, others are new. In the Roots phase, organizers begin immersing themselves in the community they organize, learning about individual and collective histories, strengths, challenges, and priorities. Some organizers described needing to learn to de-center themselves and internalize that the community they organize is the heart of the work and the locus of power. For some organizers, this transition is challenging, but also freeing, as they release notions of organizers as charismatic and controlling leaders and orient to accompanying and being in service to community. “I think the most empowering and liberating part of this work is the radical acceptance that you’re a student first and foremost. You’re a student in community.”

Similarly, organizers described how they increased their awareness and understanding of the larger external context in which they organize. Some organizers are conditioned early in their lives to be clear-eyed about the world around them, while others had to broaden their consciousness about the fundamental structures and systems that shaped their lives and the lives of community members. Organizers learn that oppressive systems are pervasive, but also movable. They have the power to change them, especially in partnership with their community of leaders.

As organizers learn to understand the challenges their community faces, they also learn to uncover, take in, and process information about local history, context, and political dynamics. Together, this knowledge of community and context informs how they analyze power and identify the strategies needed to impact change. As organizers learn about the world around them, they learn to use this knowledge as a tool that informs strategy. They digest multiple forms of information about their context and apply the skills of the discipline to develop strategies and tactics that can respond to the world around them.

“

I’m a Black woman born and raised in the south. I am fighting for my life, not in a hyperbolic way. And that’s what keeps me centered is remembering that I’m fighting for my life, and I’m fighting for the lives of others. It’s very, really very practical. So, I don’t just identify with the community that I’m serving, I am in a very beautiful way the community ... I am the community. I take that responsibility very seriously. And I see it as a privilege and an honor and really my calling.

”

What Helps Organizers Learn About the World Around Them

- Engagement with community, e.g., one-to-ones, canvassing, community meetings
- Political education
- Power analysis and strategy trainings



III. Nutrients for Organizer Growth: Experiences and Relationships

In our conversations with organizers, we invited them to share an artifact that represents a significant moment of growth and learning in their organizing career. The collection of artifacts organizers shared evoked loved ones and revered mentors; moments of joy, loss, and struggle; and the people and campaigns that left a lasting impression on their organizing—their grandfather’s old union pin, an agenda from the first chapter meeting they facilitated, a lanyard with name tags from trainings, a handwritten note from a community leader. Together the artifacts paint a picture of the experiences and relationships that make a substantial impact on organizer growth and help them move through the phases.

Like plants that need sunlight, water, and healthy soil to grow and flourish, experiences and relationships are the essential nutrients that propel organizers through the phases and support them to learn about the discipline, themselves, and the world around them. Experiences and relationships are mutually informing and synergistic. Together, they support, challenge, strengthen, and guide organizers and, at times, cause organizers to change direction. They are the underlying nourishment for learning the craft.

In this section, we highlight the experiences and relationships that organizers named frequently as important to their growth. In doing this, we underscore that organizers need a range of experiences and relationships to grow, and they need opportunities to bring them together to catalyze learning. Experiences and relationships come together in moments of formal and informal reflection. Powerful learning happens when organizers engage their relationships with mentors, peers, community members, or supervisors to reflect on and make meaning of experiences. When navigating experiences alone, organizers expressed feelings of doubt, isolation, and loneliness. However, when organizers were provided the space and relationships to reflect on these experiences in connection with others, it fostered learning, growth, and confidence.



Experiences: The Events that Shape and Inform Organizers

Learning by doing is essential to developing the craft of organizing. When sharing their artifacts, organizers described a range of experiences from conducting their first one-to-one with a community member and

facilitating community meetings, to organizing actions and developing a campaign and navigating local politics. These experiences increase in complexity and challenge as organizers advance through the phases of growth and take on more responsibility and leadership.

In the learning conversations, organizers lifted up five types of experiences that supported their learning and development:

1 | Training 2 | Shadowing 3 | Doing 4 | Sensing 5 | Journeying

Training: Learning Organizing Skills

Structured training is often an organizer's first formal experience learning the discipline of organizing, but it also can serve as a means for ongoing skills and capacity building throughout an organizer's career. In the Roots phase, training may focus more on organizing basics, including canvassing, one-to-ones, political education, and mobilization tactics. Later, training encompasses education about strategy and power analysis as well as staff management. Some organizers spoke of being agitated at a training by a trainer or peer, helping them step back and reflect on themselves and their organizing practice. For many organizers, the value of training lies in the opportunities to connect with other organizers and learn from each other's experiences and work.

“ The trainings from the very first bootcamp training I went to as a member to week-long, to training the core content and reflecting on what that looked like in practice, I think has been really essential in learning the craft of the tools that we're using.”

Shadowing: Seeing Organizing in Action

Shadowing is when an organizer observes another organizer put organizing principles into action. It demonstrates organizing as a “more intentional and methodological craft,” supporting organizers to move from theory to practice. Observing and learning from other organizers is particularly important in the Roots phase of development, helping organizers build confidence and grasp the basics. For more seasoned organizers, shadowing provides new insights and skills to navigate spaces with elected officials and develop more sophisticated strategies to build power.

“ When I started organizing, I wasn't really sure what I was doing, right? For me, it was really important to see people that I thought were experts doing the work and showing me the possibilities. It helped inform my style of organizing and facilitation. It also helped me get out of that imposter syndrome a little bit.”

Doing: Practicing and Developing the Discipline

Direct, hands-on experiential learning is often at the heart of organizer development. It is when organizers apply what has been learned and observed, put it into practice, and make it one's own. Learning by doing occurs throughout the phases of growth, but the level of risk and experimentation increases with maturity

and experience. In the Roots phase, learning can take the form of role playing, repetition of skills, being observed while organizing, and by just diving in and doing the work. Later, it can take the form of more intentional experimentation. Practice allows organizers to take risks, fail, win, lose, and learn.

“ We learn by doing, right? Many of us, we learned by taking action and getting involved ... there’s no master’s in organizing, but there are certain things that, through the experience that we engage in a daily basis, we continually glean more, and we develop that knowledge base or that experience to be able to bring about the change in communities.”

Sensing: Reading and Translating the External Context

Sensing is the interaction between an organizer and their community. Through both formal and informal methods, such as deep listening and one-to-ones, organizers continuously engage with communities to learn their stories, history, culture, strengths, pain, needs, and priorities. Sensing is the meaning making that occurs as an organizer takes in and translates information. It is a type of intuitive learning in which organizers learn to “have an ear to the ground,” assess the context and community’s energy, and translate it into strategies and campaigns to advance community priorities. One organizer described it as akin to a “sense of smell.” With increasing experience, organizers also develop a keener sense of the politics and players that have influence on their community’s interests. They gain an understanding of the opposition and decision-makers and use formal power analysis and increased political sense to change course, identify new targets, make bigger demands, and develop more nuanced strategies.

“ It is knowing the knowledge of the base you are trying to do your work in. That is knowing the people, knowing the turf, knowing the power brokers in the turf and some of the folks who have influence.”

Journeying: Having New Organizing Experiences to Reset and Reinspire

As described in the Regeneration phase, organizers can experience episodic or sustained moments of doubt, boredom, or inertia in their organizing career. At those points, organizers described the value of stepping out of their organizing job for a period of time to experience a new type of organizing, like labor or electoral organizing, or to experience organizing in a new community or context for an extended period. Organizers said these experiences supported them to recommit to organizing, gave them new ideas for their practice, and deepened their connection to themselves. Stepping out reinvigorated their interest and love for organizing.

“ You can’t stay in the same organization, same location for a long time and grow as rapidly as you can. In Greek mythology, people would go out, they hear the call to the sea, an adventure, and they don’t know whether they can do the thing. And then they go out and then they do the thing and then they come back transformed. People need those experiences.”

Relationships: The Individuals Who Support Organizers' Growth

Relationships are the building blocks of organizing. Organizers learn early on that successful organizing is rooted in a relational culture in which relationships are built intentionally and with purpose. Organizers are accompanied through the phases of growth by a range of individuals and relationships who provide support, guidance, motivation, agitation, and learning. These individuals help organizers navigate and make meaning of the experiences to foster greater understanding of the discipline, the self, and the world around them. Each serves a different purpose and provides different support, but central to all successful relationships is trust. Organizers described four types of relationships as the most influential in their development:

- 1 | Supervisors
- 2 | Mentors and Coaches
- 3 | Peers
- 4 | Community Leaders

“ I didn't even know what organizing was, but I was walking in that path, and I was just starting to learn as I walked. But the first thing was to find someone who believed in me. So, relationships are the starting point.”

Supervisors: Providing Guidance and Tools

Supervisors are senior or lead organizers, organizing directors, or executive directors who provide regular oversight and professional guidance on organizing skills, strategies, campaigns, and goals. They support organizers in “how to do the work well [and] how to continue to do the work” by helping organizers understand their strengths, how to leverage them, and see opportunities for improvement. Supervisors play a uniquely important role in the early development of an organizer and potentially a predictive role in their sustainability. Supervisors can help seeds take root. Supervision that is done well was described as “magical” and as a “beautiful, unique opportunity.”

“ The unique contribution of supervisors is that these folks get to see you on a regular basis, so they start to really understand your strengths and call those out, as well as start to see the patterns of weaknesses. In good supervision, there's deep enough trust built that there can be some really hard agitations to push through the myths and lies that you've started to believe about yourself.”

Mentors and Coaches: Supporting Personal Growth

Mentors and coaches are often individuals outside of the organizer's organization who do not have a formal oversight role of the organizer but play an influential role in organizers' personal and professional growth. Organizers spoke of having multiple mentors to address different needs and garner different perspectives. Some organizers intentionally sought out mentors and others emerged organically. These external mentors exposed organizers to different paradigms, worldviews, and perspectives.

As discussed in the phases, organizers' catalyst for entering organizing is often intensely personal. Mentors help organizers reconnect to that spark and forge their own path as an organizer. This relationship creates a safe space for organizers to reflect, center themselves, and have honest conversation about their lives.

Organizers emphasized that while supervisors focus on organizers' professional skills and development of the discipline, mentors focus on the big picture. Mentors see the organizer holistically and remind them to connect to and care for themselves, encourage them to take the long view of both their personal and professional growth, and help them answer the "bigger questions" about their place in the field and in their community. As one organizer shared "there is a level of honesty that can happen with mentors you can't have with supervisors."

What Makes Good Supervisors and Mentors

What sets supervisors and mentors apart from the relationships organizers develop with peers and community members is the positional power that supervisors and mentors have in relation to the organizers they support. In these relationships, there is often a power imbalance with supervisors and mentors exerting influence on organizers' jobs throughout the phases of growth.

Good supervision and mentorship is grounded in trust, boundaries, and an understanding of the supervisor or mentor's power over the organizer. This creates the foundation and context for constructive and honest growth conversations that allow the organizer the space to fail, experiment, and learn. Organizers emphasized that good supervisor and mentor relationships focus on and prioritize the organizer, and their self-interest, leadership, and growth as opposed to a focus on top-down, rigid instruction and numbers and metrics.

“

I've had a lot of really good mentors, I've had some amazing mentors, I've also had a lot of bad mentors. I think the real difference there is whether the mentor helped me get clear on my own self-interest. That's a really key indication. If somebody's not really helping you get clear about your self-interest, then they might be trying to organize you into theirs. And the mentors that I've had that really helped me get clear have made sure that we share a vision. Because I've had a lot of really powerful people as mentors and that's good, but sometimes powerful people can push you in their vision if you're not clear about yours.”

Peers: Facilitating Truth-telling and Accountability

Peers are in a similar phase of their development which allows organizers to “think together” and share in the struggles, challenges, and victories. Peers help organizers feel less alone and normalize how difficult the work is. One organizer described how working with the same peers for over a decade fostered familiarity, stability, and confidence. Peers have more direct and recent experience with organizing and are more accessible. Organizers expressed having greater comfort asking their peers questions particularly when unsure or lacking confidence. “I feel like peers are very helpful in signaling and letting you know to trust your gut and it feels easier to gut check with peers than it does sometimes with the supervisors and mentors.”

Community Leaders and Members: Ground-Truthing

Community leaders and members are central to organizing and organizers' development. Training and organizing philosophy provide the knowledge, theory, and intellectual rubric for organizers, but community members humanize it and make it real. They are partners in the work and an external reality check that cuts through intellectualization and professionalization.

Organizers most consistently described the role of community leaders and members as “grounding.” Community relationships ground organizers in “real life,” “the world as it is and how the majority of the world are experiencing it.” For organizers who are part of the community they are organizing, the relationships are more personal and ground them in their own experience and motivation to organize.


“*I feel like I don't have an external mentor, but I do listen a lot to what the community has to say because they show up as leaders in many ways and I feel really grounded. I am the community, so I end up being a mentor to them as well. I try to show up the best way that I can, just the way that they're showing up for me.*”

Reflecting: Where Relationships and Experiences Come Together

Organizer growth is nurtured at the intersection of relationships and experiences. The supportive relationships organizers cultivate help organizers unpack and reflect on experiences and translate those experiences into change and action. The interplay between experiences and relationships enable organizers to metabolize their experiences and extract lessons.

Intentional reflection, both formal and informal, is one of the core practices organizers and their organizations employ to imbue experiences with meaning. Sometimes reflective spaces are institutionalized within organizations through practices such as shadowing and then debriefing and deconstructing the experience and through a supervisor or peer observing the organizer and providing feedback. Many organizations have reflective practices that allow them to debrief actions, strategies, and campaigns as a team or one-to-one with a supervisor. As one organizer said, “if it's not worth doing, it's not worth debriefing.” These meetings allowed organizers to unpack and assess strategies, explore their role and feelings, and learn from the experience. “I've done a lot of reflection after actions or research meetings, and they have helped me develop what could have gone differently.”

Some of these spaces are informal and ad-hoc, created by organizers to meet specific learning needs. For example, some organizers developed reading groups to “develop a habit and a capacity to read and think conceptually and reflect through history, through literature to take a current context and then reflect upon it.” Additionally, organizers described needing space for self-reflection to increase emotional awareness, address issues of doubt and insecurity, and work through trauma with the support of supervisors, coaches, colleagues, and mentors. For some, speaking with individuals outside of their organization helped them to discuss personal issues more freely.



Organizers emphasized that having space to reflect on failure is particularly important to growth. Failure is a common and normal experience among organizers. The opportunity and ability to reflect on these failures can be the difference between either inhibiting or promoting growth. For example, the self-doubt and feelings of imposterism in the early Seeds and Roots phases can squelch growth and lead organizers to leave the field. The ability to share and discuss these experiences normalizes them, diminishes the stigma, and promotes learning. “You learn more when you lose than when you win.” Failure can also happen at the scale of a campaign, but the intentional practice of debriefing the experience to learn from it can promote new and innovative strategies and increase confidence and creativity. If learning and reflection is embedded in the process, it allows organizers to accept the failure, explore what did not work, strategize what could be different in the future, and catalyze experimentation.



IV. Tending to Organizer Growth: Opportunities for the Field

One of the most significant lessons we draw from this project is that the community organizing field is only as strong and powerful as the people who do the organizing. The vitality of the field and the strength of its organizations depend on a cadre of organizers with the know-how, motivation, and freedom to be in the work for the long haul. Organizer sustainability is inextricably tied to the sustainability of the field and organizations. If we value the transformative impact that organizers have, organizer growth cannot be an afterthought.

The landscape of organizer development and training has changed significantly since the early 2000s. Organizers and field leaders alike emphasized that the field-wide infrastructure for organizer development and training has dwindled, and notably, organizations' capacities are increasingly stretched thin, leaving organizers without the web of training and resources they need to move through the phases of growth. As a result, the field is experiencing an organizer staffing crisis that impacts the ability of organizing groups to grow their constituencies and wield power.

We believe the framework we share in this report provides a grounding resource to help the organizing field and its funders and supporters connect solutions and interventions to the things that have made a difference in organizer growth. The stories and experiences organizers shared with us demonstrate that there is some universality to the arc of organizer development, no matter what context organizers are in or organizing tradition they come from. As they develop the craft, organizers experience moments that mirror the excitement of Seeds, overwhelm of Roots, confidence of Blooms, inertia of Regeneration, and wisdom of Offshoots. They learn about the art and science, themselves, and the world around them, and they need a range of relational and experiential nutrients that allow them to grow. This framework challenges simplistic, romanticized, or overly dogmatic perceptions of organizing. We believe that, taken together, the phases, dimensions of learning, and nutrients of organizer growth provide structure to identify opportunities for intervention and investment.

Opportunities to Till the Soil for Organizer Growth

As organizers shared what has made a difference in nurturing their growth, it became clear that while organizers need an array of relationships and experiences to grow, some are more accessible than others. Organizers emphasized that the organizing field needs greater and more consistent investment to develop field-level infrastructure that provides organizers with more ready access to the relationships and experiences that catalyze their growth. Examples of such investment include:

- Pipeline and organizer “feeder” programs that identify potential organizers in the Seeds phase and place them with organizing groups.
- Apprenticeship programs for organizers in the Roots phase that provide new organizers with a structured runway into the organizing profession. These programs could include access to

mentorship, supervision, and peer relationships that support personal and professional growth, as well as training and hands-on experiences that further skills development.

- Trainings that help organizers in the Blooms phase grow into lead organizer and organizing Director positions and bolster their capacity to train and mentor others and take on new leadership.
- Organizing exchanges and opportunities for organizers in the Regeneration phase to temporarily organize for another organization or in a different community to recharge and get re-inspired.
- Mentorship training and matching program for experienced but recently retired or departed organizers in the Offshoots phase to become mentors to new organizers.

That said, investing in field-wide infrastructure is necessary, but also not sufficient. Organizers grow in the container of their organizations. Organization cultures, strategies, and practices have significant implications for the health of organizer growth. Sending an organizer to one training is not enough for an organizer to develop the craft. They need to return to an organizational environment where they can put new skills into practice in the field, get feedback, and shadow experienced organizers. Yet, organizations consistently operate with limited time and resources to invest deeply in organizer growth.

Organizers shared numerous ideas for how organizations can grow stronger benches of organizers including higher salaries to attract and retain organizers, trainings for power analysis and strategy development, and more opportunities to connect with peers and mentors outside of their organizations. What underlies all of these opportunities is the need for more funding across the field that allows for flexibility and experimentation. To grow and sustain organizers, organizations need space and capacity to build and support cultures of risk taking, innovation, and reflection. Having the space to take risks, experiment, and fail helps organizers hone their craft, build their confidence, and develop their own approach. However, time and resource constraints, rigid expectations about metrics and outcomes, or risk aversion can create barriers to those experiences. Not only does this get in the way of personal growth and development, but it also limits organizers' ability to see and experience the potential and power of organizing.

Call to Action

More than ever, we need a robust field of organizers who can nurture and fuel the power of communities to hold and advance a vision for a better future. The scale of the challenges the organizing field faces to rebuild its ranks are significant, but not insurmountable if we can channel our admiration and respect for organizers' work into resources and support that allows them to grow and stay in the field for the long-haul.

Whether you are an organizer, a funder, or an evaluator or researcher there is a role for you to play in tilling the soil to create the conditions for a vibrant organizing field. As you reflect on the phases, learning dimensions, and nutrients of organizer growth, we invite you to consider how you can help create a healthy environment for developing and sustaining organizers. What mindsets, beliefs, or approaches do we need to prune? What tried and true practices do we need to hold onto? How can we nurture and cultivate the conditions for growth?

Reflection Questions

- **If you are an organizer:** What do you need to grow in your organizing practice? What can you ask for?
- **If you are in senior leadership in the organizing field:** How can you create better conditions of growth for your organizing staff?
- **If you are an evaluator or researcher:** How can you change your learning practices and processes to align with organizer learning?
- **If you are a funder:** How can you support the sustainability of organizers and the organizing field?

Creating stronger and more consistent scaffolding for organizer growth will require us to take the long-view, seeing beyond the horizon of our organizations' immediate interests, to imagine an organizing field with the capacity for transformative and sustained organizer growth. Only then will we see organizers and the organizing field step into its full power.

Inspired by a powerful reflection from one of the organizers who participated in our conversations, we leave you with this question: What would be possible if we took a sacred and generational approach to growing and sustaining organizers?

“

I know, for me, my organizing philosophy, but just life philosophy, in general, is someday I'm gonna be someone's ancestor and what is the story that people will tell about what it is that I did here?

And I think that if we actually take the generational approach to our work, we'll have some wins in our lifetime, but a lot of the bigger things that we fight for aren't things that we'll see. What are the ways in which then we prime the ground for people to finish the race that we're already running? And I don't think everyone has that kind of lens on their organizing, a strong connection point of what does this mean after me, not just in the moment of me.

And I think that if we were able to make that kind of shift in our field, then our work would feel a lot more powerful. Which is crazy to think because this work already feels very powerful, very valuable, right? But I just wonder what else we might win or who else we might be able to pull into our orbit of organizing if we're able to take a more sacred approach to what it is we do and why we do it and who it benefits after us.

”



Appendix A: About the Authors and Organizer Participants

Authors

The Organizer Learning Project is a project of **Grassroots Solutions**, an engagement strategy and evaluation consulting firm that is committed to building healthy, just, and equitable communities. We are a diverse team of leaders who come from wide-ranging backgrounds in policy, campaigns, organizing, and philanthropy.

The project is led by three evaluators and researchers: Katie Fox of Grassroots Solutions, Gigi Barsoum of Barsoum Policy Consulting, and Margaret Post of Clark University. We are long-standing collaborators and thought partners on the evaluation of power building and community organizing.

Katie Fox, Senior Strategist at Grassroots Solutions, brings over 17 years of experience in social justice evaluation, grant-making, organizing, and advocacy. Katie has been an ardent supporter of community organizing since her first job organizing in New England. Katie has expertise in facilitating learning about community organizing, grassroots power building, social movements, and civic engagement. Since 2018, Katie has been creating and sharing guidance on the evaluation of grassroots social movements and power building.

Dr. Gigi Barsoum, Principal of Barsoum Policy Consulting is an experienced evaluator of advocacy and organizing efforts, and developer of the **power-building framework**. She partners with foundations and nonprofits to develop and evaluate social change strategies. Formerly a program manager at The California Endowment, she has more than 15 years of public policy experience at the local, state, and federal levels.

Dr. Margaret Post, Associate Research Professor at Clark University in the Department of Sustainability and Social Justice began her career as an organizer in California's Central Valley, and has been teaching, training, researching, and practicing organizing for over twenty-five years. As an engaged scholar, Margaret integrates organizing practices with participatory methods to facilitate shared learning and collective action. Her current scholarship focuses on how grassroots nonprofit organizations influence social policy change.

If you have questions, feedback, or would like to receive updates on this project, please contact Katie at katie@grassrootsolutions.com.

Organizer Participants

The 75 organizers who participated in the learning and sense-making conversations, hailed from 22 states and represent a diverse cross-section of organizations, issue areas, and organizing traditions. Below is a list of the organizers who gave us permission to name them in this report. Listed or not, we are deeply grateful for all participants' contributions to this project.

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Alex Cook | Abortion Action Missouri |
| Allex Luna | United for a New Economy |
| Alwiyah Shariff | Ohio Voices |
| Ana Salazar | Neighbor 2 Neighbor MA |
| Andreanecia Morris | Housing NOLA |
| Angel Mortel | LA Voice |
| Anna Eng | Nevadans for the Common Good |
| Aviva Her-Welber | Essex County Community Organization |
| Ben Chin | Maine People's Resource Center |
| Benjamin Wood | Pomona Day Labor Center |
| Brianna Brown | Texas Organizing Project |
| Brittany Hughes | Missouri Faith Voices |
| Carmen Medrano | United for a New Economy |
| Cea Weaver | Housing Justice for All |
| Daniel Rodela | Faith in the Valley |
| Demian Kogan | Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights |
| Eli Berkowitz | Community Voices Heard |
| Elizabeth Hall | Bay Area Organizing Committee |
| Emma Paulino | Faith in Action East Bay |
| Erin Jackson | Stand Up Alaska |
| Fidelina Espinoza | Centro Binacional Para El Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño |
| Isabel Lopez | Brockton Workers Collective |
| Jody Stewart | New Jersey Organizing Project |
| Joey Ramirez | California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation |
| Jonathan Alingu | Central Florida Jobs with Justice |
| Josh Poe | Louisville Tenants Union |
| Juvenal Solano | Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Keturah Brewster | I Have a Future |
| Kristen Vermetten | New Georgia Project |
| Lew Finfer | Massachusetts Action for Justice |
| Lilah Saber | POWER PA |
| Liliana Alvarez | Central Florida Jobs with Justice |
| Mateo Guerrero | Make the Road NY |
| Maxx Boykin | |
| Miles Tokunow | Santa Fe Dreamers Project |
| Ponsella Hardaway | MOSES |
| Ramiro Luna | Somos Tejas |
| Ruben Rodriguez | |
| Sarah Stripp | Springboard to Opportunities |
| Sergio Luna | Inland Congregations United for Change |
| Sharee Powell | Community Voices Heard |
| Stephanie Zhang | Hoosier Action Resource Center |
| Surya Kalra | EPISO in El Paso |
| Teresa Perez | San Diego Organizing Project |
| Wes Lathrop | Lift Every Voice Philly |
| Whitney Hu | Churches United for Fair Housing |
| Will Tanzman | The People's Lobby |



Appendix B: Methods and Data Sources

Commitments and Approach

Four commitments defined our approach:

1 | **Grounding in Organizer Stories and Experiences**

Storytelling, relationships, and experiential learning are core to organizing and often how organizers share and pass down practices and lessons. We sought to honor that tradition by using small group learning conversations as the primary data collection method.

2 | **Learning in Relationship**

Organizers grow and learn in relationship. We strove to create opportunities for organizers to connect with themselves and each other. To set the stage for a generative and relational interaction, we introduced organizers by email ahead of time, set expectations about how we wanted participants to show up in the conversation, and created space for organizers to be able to react to and ask questions of each other throughout the dialogue. As a result, each conversation had its own “flavor” as each small group gravitated toward questions and issues of shared interest. As we gathered feedback on the conversations, organizers consistently said they most valued the opportunity to connect with other organizers, learn from each other’s stories, and “know they are not alone.”

3 | **Embracing Iteration and Emergence**

Organizing is an iterative, strategic practice that is guided by knowledge, skills, and intuition. We approached this project with an openness to trusting the wisdom of participants as our guide for structuring our approach and inquiry. The data from conversations was iteratively analyzed to embrace emerging interests, needs, and insights. Data collection was modified in response to emergent learnings.

4 | **Nurturing Action**

Organizing is ultimately about action for social change. Our intention for this project is to nurture action and seed conversations with organizers, national organizing networks, funders, researchers, and evaluators about how we can all better support organizer growth, learning, and sustainability. We purposely took an affirmative approach to the project, and sought to make visible what worked in organizer growth to spark ideas and solutions.

Data Collection

Learning Conversations

Data collection for this project centered on structured learning conversations with a diverse mix of organizers. This process has allowed us to map the trajectory of organizer growth and development, uncovering how organizers evolve from their initial entry point into the field to becoming seasoned strategists and changemakers.

- **Format.** We held 15 semi-structured, 2-hour learning conversations with small groups of organizers (2–7 people in each) between July 2023 through February 2024. Simultaneous Spanish translation was provided for two conversations.
- **Recruitment.** We recruited organizers nationwide through our team’s various networks as well as a snowball sampling approach. We began outreach to organizers that we knew personally. As we began holding conversations, we asked participating organizers to recommend and introduce us to other organizers in their networks. We recruited participants who had worked as full-time, paid community organizers for at least two years. We defined “community organizer” as the people who do the day-to-day work of engaging a group of people who share common values and interests to stand together and take collective action to advance their shared structural and material goals.
- **Participants.** Seventy-five organizers participated in the learning conversations from different geographic locations and community organizing networks and traditions and who organized different constituencies and issues. Each organizer received a \$500 honorarium for their participation.
- **Facilitators.** The three project leaders co-facilitated 12 of the learning conversations, sharing and alternating roles throughout the process and using the same protocol. In addition, In-Advance facilitated three learning conversations with organizers in their cohorts.
- **Evaluation Form.** After each learning conversation we sent an evaluation form to participants for feedback and recommendations for other potential organizers to invite to the learning conversations.

Learning Conversations Protocol

The learning conversation protocol consisted of two main areas of exploration:

- 1 | **How did you learn to organize?** We asked organizers to share and describe important moments of growth for them in their career—what were those moments? What did they learn? Who did they learn with and from? We invited participants to share “an artifact” of their learning and tell a story about this lesson. These stories were the primary source of insights for data analysis and the sense-making process.
- 2 | **How do you learn in action?** We asked organizers about the practices they employ on a day-to-day basis to learn about what is or is not working in their organizing. We asked

about what informs their strategy development and change to their strategy. We also asked about how they assess progress.

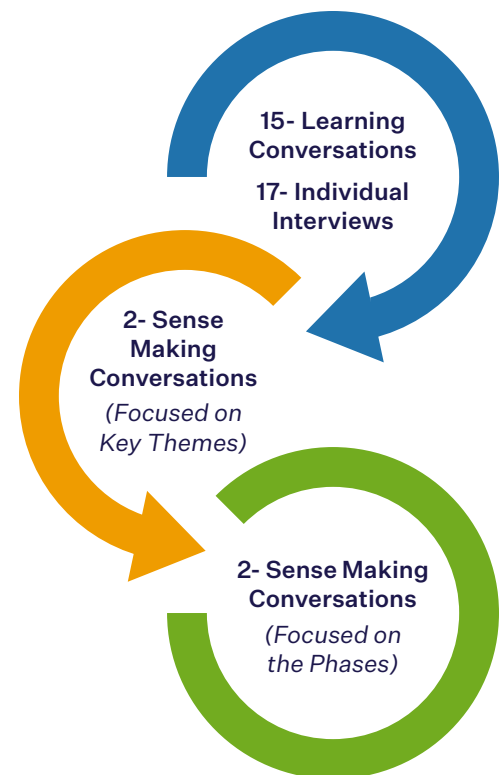
Interviews

In addition to the learning conversations, we conducted interviews with 17 organizing field leaders, experts, former and retired organizers, trainers, and researchers to gather historical and current perspectives on the existing resources available for organizer development as well as the gaps and needs in the field and how to address them. This data was triangulated with other data sources to identify context, points of alignment, validation, and new themes for exploration.

Data Analysis and Sense-Making

We conducted a thematic analysis of the learning conversation data through five iterative methods.

- 1 | Top sheet summaries** of each of the 15 learning conversations were completed by each of the three team members to identify key themes.
- 2 | Team debriefs and reflective conversations** were conducted on an ongoing basis to discuss emergent learnings and modify the learning conversation protocol as appropriate.
- 3 | Conversations were transcribed by Speechpad and coded** using Dedoose and a high-level coding scheme.
- 4 | Synthesized themes and descriptions** were developed of what organizers were learning and how experiences and relationships catalyzed lessons about new skills, practices, and approaches to organizing. We also mapped what was learned and how. Through this process, key phases that marked significant moments of arrival, transition, and growth emerged, yielding the Phases of Organizer Growth.
- 5 | Sensemaking conversations** were conducted with 24 organizers who had participated in the initial learning conversations. We shared early themes and anonymous quotes in advance along with a set of discussion questions. The conversations allowed us to deepen our analysis, gather additional insights, and shape the final analysis presented in this report.





Appendix C: Resources About Organizing Landscape

The following resources provide strong analysis and research on current challenges and opportunities for the organizing field.

- All Due Respect. 2022. All Due Respect: Building Strong Organizations by Creating Fair Labor Standards for Organizers, <https://www.allduerespectproject.org/nationalreport>.
- Beth Jacob and James Mumm for People’s Action Institute. 2023. The Antidote to Authoritarianism: How an Organizing Revival can Build a Multiracial Democracy and an Inclusive Economy, <https://peoplesaction.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Antidote-to-Authoritarianism-EN-2024-1.pdf>.
- Future Currents. 2024. Fighting Shape: An Assessment of U.S. Organizing.
- Maurice Mitchell for The Forge. 2022. Building Resilient Organizations, <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/building-resilient-organizations>.
- Re:power and Analyst Institute. 2022. Voices from the Frontlines: What Organizers Need in 2022, <https://repower.org/2022-organizer-survey/>.
- The Action Lab, Initiative for Community Power, and The Forge. 2024. Power to Win, <https://www.actionlabny.org/power-to-win-report>.

Graphic design for this report was provided by Alexander Graphics, Minneapolis, MN, October 2024.