



WHAT'S THE REAL PROBLEM?

Here are some ways to understand what looks like apathy, and to respond to it.

“No one seems to care.”

Everyone cares about something—but the *something* might not be what you expect. Pick out a few co-workers you'd like to know better. Make a point of talking with them, and find out what's on their minds.

Maybe the drug-testing policy that's grinding your gears isn't at the top of their list because something else is bugging them more: a foul chemical in the air, a mean supervisor, a toothache and no dental plan, a shift that means they hardly see their kids, being forced to defend a stupid policy to customers... The only way to find out is to listen.

Someone who's facing sexual harassment, for instance, might feel strongly about it—but she might assume it's not *your* issue, or not a *union* issue.

Show your co-workers respect and understanding. When they feel that from you, they're more likely to respect the things you care about.

“It's hard to see how things could change.”

Maybe your co-workers are just as bugged by the drug-testing policy as you are, but it seems too big to tackle. The boss has done a good job of cementing the idea that the decision is final—and fighting it sounds like a waste of time.

It's perfectly reasonable that people feel this way, especially if they've always felt powerless and disorganized at work. People are used to going along to get along. If your co-workers have never felt strength in numbers, or seen a group take action to change even something small, why would they believe they could change something big?

As an organizer, it's your job to inspire your co-workers that change is possible if you work together. Part of this is developing a credible plan to win. Ask, “What solution are we proposing?” “Who in management has the authority to say yes?” “What could we do together to get that person to say yes?” Share stories of tactics that have worked elsewhere (you'll learn plenty in this book).

Often it helps to start small. Involving your co-workers in a tiny campaign that gets results is a way to “show, not tell” them that collective action has power.

Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board so far, taking just a small step out of their comfort zone. When it works, more people will be drawn in. As they participate, their confidence will grow, and you can go farther each time. (We'll talk more about choosing an organizing issue in Lesson 4.)

Hopelessness can be a strong habit. It's easier to break a habit with group support. Bringing people together can help individuals get past their discouragement.



“No one’s willing to do anything.”

Have you asked them personally to do something specific? Most of us aren’t natural-born organizers. Many of your co-workers won’t initiate activity—but they might respond if asked directly by someone they trust.

Figure out some very small, specific requests, and personally approach a co-worker. At first this might be as simple as answering a survey, coming to lunch with other co-workers to discuss a problem, or signing a group letter. (We’ll talk more about choosing your tactics in Lesson 5.)

Be respectful of time constraints in their lives. Show lots of appreciation for anything they’re willing to do—and make it clear that any victories were won by the whole team. This attitude of respect will encourage them to do more in the future.

“No one comes to meetings.”

Think about how people are notified about meetings. An email or a notice on the bulletin board isn’t enough. Personal, face-to-face invitations are the best. Divide up your workplace and find several other people to share the work of inviting people individually.

Also consider the practical things that could make meetings more accessible: scheduling, location, childcare, translation, transportation.

When people do come to a meeting, it had better be pleasant and productive—or they won’t be back! People are incredibly busy these days, and you convey respect for

their participation by planning the meeting ahead of time. Prepare a clear agenda, a time limit, and a reason to attend, such as a hot issue.

If a meeting is just to “get information,” it’s easy to skip it. People will be more motivated to attend a meeting where they have a meaningful role to play—for instance, to help make an action plan. If you miss that meeting, there’s a consequence: the plan will be made without your input.

All that said, sometimes people simply can’t make it to meetings—for instance, because of parenting responsibilities. These people can still play crucial roles in organizing while they’re at work. Be flexible.

