



AN ORGANIZING CONVERSATION

Here are some guidelines for a fruitful conversation (or a series of conversations) with a co-worker.

Nobody should follow a script mechanically, of course. Talk with people like human beings! But think of this outline as a tool. The steps can help you move toward a goal, so your co-worker isn't left feeling like her time's been wasted with a spiel or a gripe session. Done right, an organizing conversation leads to action.

Your job is mostly to ask questions. You want your co-worker to realize:

- She cares about a problem.
- There's a decision-maker who has the power to fix this problem.
- The decision-maker won't fix it until someone pushes them to.
- If your co-worker really wants this problem fixed, she has to join you and other co-workers in taking action.

But just telling her all this wouldn't be very effective. Instead, you want to ask the right questions that get her to say it herself. We tend to remember what we said, not what the other person said.

1. DISCOVER THE ISSUES

Begin by asking questions—and listening to the answers—to learn what your co-worker cares about. Make your questions open-ended, especially when you're getting to know someone.

How's your day going?

How did you get this job?

What was it like when you first started here?

When you're organizing around a particular issue, your questions might get more pointed. Still, even if you have a petition about the awful new schedule, don't leap straight into "Will you sign this?" Instead, ask:

How's the new schedule working for you?

The point is for your co-worker to remind herself how she feels about this problem, before you ask her to act. If you've discussed this issue before, you can still ask how it's affecting her today, or share someone else's story and get her reaction.



2. AGITATE

React to what she tells you, and ask follow-up questions. By reacting, the organizer can help the other person feel she has permission to be angry:

Wow. How long has that been going on?

How does that make you feel?

Is that okay with you?

How are you coping?

How is that affecting your family?

3. LAY THE BLAME

Get her talking about who's responsible.

Why do you think we're having this problem?

Who's in a position to fix it? What would they have to do?

Do you think this problem is going to correct itself?

Many times we feel our problems are just “the way things are.” Realizing that bad conditions didn't fall from the sky can be empowering. If someone made the decision that caused this mess, that someone could also unmake it.

4. MAKE A PLAN TO WIN

Now that your co-worker is angry, it's time to offer some hope. Hope comes from your power in numbers and a winnable plan. That's how you make your problem into a problem for the decision-maker.

Most people want to go back to the old schedule. The supervisor hasn't listened, but what if 25 of us sign this petition, and we all march into his office together to deliver it?

What do you think he'll do? Will he be able to keep ignoring us?

What's his boss going to say?



This step will be trickier if today's petition doesn't address a problem that this person feels strongly about. You'll have an easier time organizing if you choose issues that are widely and deeply felt—we'll talk about that in Lesson 4.

But what you can say is that power in numbers is our only way to get a say on any issue. For instance:

If we win on this issue, do you think management will learn something? Will taking action on the next issue be easier?

This is the first step. We've all got to start backing each other up. How else are we going to build enough power to fix the understaffing you're talking about?

5. GET A COMMITMENT

Ask the member to be part of the solution by taking a specific action.

Will you sign this petition and come with us to deliver it on Thursday?

If someone is fearful, acknowledge that her fears have real reasons behind them. But still, things won't get better unless she gets involved. Your job isn't to convince her that she's wrong about her fears, but that she needs to act anyway.

Is the schedule ever going to get fixed if we don't take action? Are you willing to let this problem go on?

Helping her through it will be a lot easier when you're inviting her to act on what she's already said—not pushing an action you're trying to “sell.”

6. INOCULATE AND RE-COMMIT

Now your co-worker is committed—but does she know what she's getting into? Ask how she thinks management will react to the action.

What do you think the supervisor will say when we go to his office?



If there's a likely risk she hasn't thought of, warn her about it.

What if he gets angry and threatens to write everyone up? What if he offers to meet with one or two of us but not the whole group?

Talk through the possible outcomes. Then ask whether you can still count on her participation.

Does any of that change your mind?

This part might sound like you're undermining your organizing. You've gone to all this work to help your co-worker decide to act, and now you're trying to talk her out of it? But like inoculating against a virus, the idea is to help her develop an immunity to management's attacks—by giving her a small dose before she's exposed to the real thing.

This way, when management reacts, she won't be thrown by it. In fact, your correct prediction will boost your credibility.

7. SET A FOLLOW-UP PLAN

As organizer Fred Ross put it, "90 percent of organizing is follow-up."

Agree on the next step, and when you'll check back in. Maybe she's going to meet you Thursday to deliver the petition, or she'll ask two co-workers to sign. Or maybe you simply promise to report back on Friday about how the meeting went.

Remember, you're not just trying to pull off this one action. You're also trying to draw people gradually closer to the center and build an ongoing network of communication. You're trying to make standing up, in an organized way, a normal and natural part of workplace life.

*Can you ask Jane to sign? Great!
I'll come back at the end of the shift to find out how it went, okay?*

