Entering A Community

*Entering a Community is a critical skill to anyone attempting to organize with other organizations or communities outside of their own, but especially for people who come from places of privilege or mainstream identities. Furthermore, collective liberation requires marginalized and mainstream organizations to work together in solidarity to overcome systemic and structural oppression and violence. This is a skill that takes a lot of intention and practice to hone. If you make a mistake in the process (as we are bound to do occasionally) be sure to apologize and own it.*

There are many social and environmental fights to take on within our own communities but we may find ourselves wanting to work in and with communities that are not our own. We could do this because we feel strongly about a particular issue (mountaintop removal for example) but we could also do this because we recognize that we have certain privileges and resources (such as the need to choose a master’s research paper, free time, expertise, etc) and we want to support the work of impacted communities.

When **entering a community**:

**Be Respectful**

* it’s important to **work with a community in a way that respects existing knowledge**; it is important to be a resource without trying to direct the activity of the community or assume that you have a complete understanding of the issues at play.
  + *In fact, lived experiences are just as important (if not more so) than “intellectual” or scientific fact.*
  + *Who knows more about changing local climates than Farmers?*
* We must **understand our personal goals for a group or community, and that these goals may be very different from what that group or community needs or wants.**
* We must **understand of the limits of our knowledge as individuals**, remembering that entitlement only ever invites backlash and resistance.

**Know the Lay of the Land within the community**

* Research, talk to people! to find out:
  + Past and present social, political, economic, and cultural principles and norms that already exist. It’s important to have a good understanding of the existing norms in order to wholly communicate with those who are involved in the community already. Respecting what is already there and having an awareness of the dynamics helps you understand what community dynamics and frameworks to adhere to and perhaps what community dynamics and frameworks to add to/complicate as the collaborative process continues.
  + Past and present status of organizing and activism around community issues.
    - Groups and individuals already working on similar issues.
* Leadership Identification
  + Figure out
    - who are the official leaders of the community or group: local politicians, elected club leaders, church leaders, etc.
    - who has influence or power within the community or group (e.g. old group leaders, faculty advisors, popular and respected community members, whoever runs the house that people gather and eat at, whoever throws the biggest parties).
    - Figure out who has passion and a strong motivation to better their community or organization.
  + And don’t forget to **reconsider your definition of “leader.”** A leader is not necessarily an outgoing or vocal individual.
  + Remember that **inter-generational dialogue** will be at the crux of this work. The environmental movement can become “youth-centered” sometimes, as we look to the future, but it is crucial that we engage the voices of elders and older leaders in our community work, as these voices are a source of community wisdom and perhaps history that is otherwise unavailable to us.

**Listening Projects**

* A listening project is the process of **meeting with many community members with the intention of listening to their stories and experiences with their community and the issues at play in your campaign.** Sometimes these projects result in a compilation of notes or video footage, but not necessarily.
* When working with a new community, listening projects are one of the most important tools we have to identify community concerns and build preliminary relationships with community members. Crucial!
* **It’s imperative that the perspectives/concerns/issues of the local community are at the forefront of the campaign work.** Listening projects provide a great foundation for us to come to understand these localized perspectives and concerns.

Don’t forget to;

* + - Be aware of and **respect pre-existing norms** that have already been established within a community (officially and unofficially). It’s important to understand these if we are to build new relationships.
    - Remember that if you are working in a new community, your primary objective is to provide support to that community, not to expect or demand it for yourself. Always keep in mind which organizers have opted in to organizing, and which organizers have had to organize in self-defense.
  + Listen to the Concerns of the Community/Group/Leader Fourth!
    - Spend a lot of time listening. If you are working with a new community, **follow the 75/25 rule.** Listen at least 75% of the time. You can learn a lot by listening and that can help you frame the skills you have to offer in a way that will be most appealing and approachable for the community.

\*Note: in marginalized communities there is often a history of outsiders coming in and taking advantage of people. Sometimes, even well intentioned people entering marginalized communities replicate cycles of oppression by telling people what they think is best for a community.

* + - **Be the active listener: Listen to understand, not to respond.**
      1. When in doubt, listen. When not in doubt, listen some more. When people are tired of you listening so much, listen to their concerns and ask them what they’d like you to do. Listen.
      2. CAVEAT: There cannot be the expectation that community members will have the capacity to come up with jobs for you to complete. Do not expect direction, but create space for it to be voiced.

\*Tip: Articulate your resources, not your “plans”

**Active Listening Principles** (*Text below is from Power to Change* [*http://powertochange.com*](http://powertochange.com/students/people/listen/)*.)*

1. **Face the speaker.** Sit up straight or lean forward slightly to show your attentiveness through body language.
2. **Maintain eye contact**, to the degree that you all remain comfortable.
3. **Minimize external distractions**. Turn off the TV. Put down your book or magazine, and ask the speaker and other listeners to do the same.
4. **Respond appropriately** to show that you understand. Murmur (“uh-huh” and “um-hmm”) and nod. Raise your eyebrows. Say words such as “Really,” “Interesting,” as well as more direct prompts: “What did you do then?” and “What did she say?”
5. **Focus solely on what the speaker is saying**. Try not to think about what you are going to say next. The conversation will follow a logical flow after the speaker makes her point.
6. **Minimize internal distractions.** If your own thoughts keep horning in, simply let them go and continuously re-focus your attention on the speaker, much as you would during meditation.
7. **Keep an open mind.** Wait until the speaker is finished before deciding that you disagree. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking.
8. **Avoid letting the speaker know how you handled a similar situation.** Unless they specifically ask for advice, assume they just need to talk it out.
9. **Even if the speaker is launching a complaint against you, wait until they finish to defend yourself.** The speaker will feel as though their point had been made. They won’t feel the need to repeat it, and you’ll know the whole argument before you respond. Research shows that, on average, we can hear four times faster than we can talk, so we have the ability to sort ideas as they come in…and be ready for more.
10. **Engage yourself.** Ask questions for clarification, but, once again, wait until the speaker has finished. That way, you won’t interrupt their train of thought. After you ask questions, paraphrase their point to make sure you didn’t misunderstand. Start with: “So you’re saying…”

**Tips**

* Build Relationships/Focus on **Mutual Interest**—Try to build on common ground; be aware of differences, but focus on what you have in common.
* Be willing to **adapt your vision**--Often when we wish to work with a community we will realize that what is needed may not be what we were initially envisioning. People may need child care, not leadership development; they may want help mapping graveyards and encouraging local economic development, not massive protests. It’s important to have dialogue in these situations, but as the “outsider” it’s also important to be flexible.
* Be willing to **adapt your style** -- We have to be willing to adopt community-generated models of organizing and convening, and this means putting “the matrix” on the back burner sometimes.