CHAPTER 1:
CULTIVATE RESPECT


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The Elevator and the Barbecue

Amy Calandrella learned the first building block of organizing—how to talk to her fellow workers—as an apprentice operating engineer on a construction site where her job was running the elevator, carrying supplies and workers from different trades up and down between floors.

It wasn't easy. "I was a brand new construction worker with a billion sweaty men in a tiny stainless steel box," she said. The door would open, someone would step in, and she would have 45 seconds with that person. Repeat over and over.

To make the days tolerable, "I had to figure out how to get them to talk to me about things that were interesting, as opposed to whatever they were most upset about at the moment," she said. "You're a stressed and upset worker, you're going to want to talk. How can I change the channel and get you to talk about something that isn't horrible for me and also might make this more pleasant for you? Because how much can you really repeat how upset you are at your boss or your ex-wife and still have a pleasant day?"

She started figuring out what people's "benign interests" were. "I would ask a question like, 'How long have you been in the union?' or 'What do you really love about being an

electrician?' Sometimes I would just point at a tool and ask what it did. You can draw the teacher out of people.

"Sometimes I would ask for their love story. They would want to blurt it all out, and I would say 'No, tell me chapter 1, and you're going to have to go down eventually and then you can tell me chapter 2.' I had like 45 different conversations going at once with 45 different guys, and that's what I did all day long."

There were also long waits when no one was using the elevator. To stave off boredom, Calandrella put up a map of the world, and this too became a conversation-starter. People would tell her their immigration stories, pointing out where their grandmother or they themselves had come from. As a worker you can start to feel like "your entire world is your ability to put up drywall," she said. The visual reminder of a wider world "did something to people's minds."

"You have to show someone you're interested in them."

Through all these conversations, "I learned how to have a rapport with all kinds of people," Calandrella said, "and I built a muscle for how to steer a conversation without manhandling it too much. I started asking, 'Do you have any girls in your union?' and they would give me women's numbers. I started texting all these women I'd never met before." By the end of the job, she says, "I got the phone number for every female construction worker in western Massachusetts."

Starting from these contacts, Calandrella and others have built a local organization of women in the building trades. They do tabling at career fairs and hold social events to build relationships across the trades. "I try to teach organizing skills through barbecue planning," she says. "I teach people it's possible to have relationships

with people you don't already know, or necessarily like. You can just call somebody and say, 'Hey I saw you a couple weeks ago, my name is Amy, we're organizing this barbecue, we'd love for you to...' You have to show someone you're interested in them."

Also, "you have to ask them to bring something. If you don't, they won't come." The women in the group are tough, the do-it-myself type, Calandrella says. So when they're organizing a barbecue for 60 people, "they're like, 'We're going to bring the whole barbecue between the five of us.'" But she tells them, "No, you're not allowed to bring the paper towels! You have to call so-and-so and ask her to do it."

Bringing the paper towels is a simple task anyone can do, but it's not makework—it's really needed. And contributing to something, even in a small way, changes your relationship to it: This barbecue is partly yours now. The woman who brought the paper towels may start thinking up ideas for the next event, and what role she'd like to play. Meanwhile the woman who asked her has practiced a habit she can carry over into her union work—resisting the urge to volunteer herself to write every grievance, lead every meeting, circulate every petition, paint all the signs, order all the pizzas, and speak at every rally.

Sometimes would-be organizers are nervous about bothering people. "You're not bothering somebody when you ask them to participate," Calandrella says. "You're giving them an opportunity to be of use and to feel like they are important, they matter. They're just hanging out wondering if they matter or not. That's what everyone does. So if you call them they're gonna be like, 'My God, someone knows I exist! Yeah, of course I'll bring the plastic cutlery.'"

Solidarity among co-workers is the only possible source of power against the employer. And one essential ingredient for solidarity is respect.

In the workplace we typically don't experience respect—we experience coercion. No matter how much the boss may call us "partners" or claim "we're a family here," the employment relationship is fundamentally undemocratic: The employer makes the decisions, and workers are required to comply.

The union must be different in its DNA. Starting with the first building block of organizing, the one-on-one conversation, your goal is to show your respect for your co-workers.

You're inviting them into the process of building a powerful, democratic union—one where their values, their experience, their ideas, and their contributions matter. You're inviting them to become a fellow organizer.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS OF SOLIDARITY

When you talk to your co-workers as an organizer, your goal is not to become friends, though that may happen. And you're not trying to build relationships only with people who share your values or political views, though you may find some and consider them allies.

What you are doing is attempting to build relationships of solidarity. You and your co-workers might be different in lots of ways that could divide you, such as race, gender, age, or job title; it's easy to get caught up in who you like or don't like, who's a good worker or a slacker, who is a suck-up, who is ambitious or lazy, who is helpful or toxically competitive, on and on.

"We all work for the same employer, so we are bound to one another."

But despite all these judgments there is a single bottom-line fact that, once recognized, can bring workers together: "We all work for the same employer, so we are bound to one another. If we want to change anything here, our best hope is in working together."

Developing this understanding of our common interest is the key to overcoming divisions. The strength that workers have is our numbers and our unity. To build power, we'll need to build relationships with all sorts of people.

Be honest with people about why you're talking with them, and why you're so curious about their experiences and insights. For example: "*I don't think things are going well here. I want to solve problems. I want our union to be better.*" Does that sound like you have an ulterior motive? Quite the opposite. You're sharing your values and showing your honesty.

You can do all this—show respect, build a picture of who each co-worker is, and develop relationships of solidarity—all the time, with everyone, in your most casual and your most profound interactions.

BE CURIOUS

One of the most useful qualities an organizer can cultivate is *curiosity.* You actually want to know something about the person you're talking to.

For that you'll need to listen, rather than doing most of the talking yourself. Many organizers suggest that you listen 80 percent of the time and talk 20 percent. But curiosity goes deeper than that.

Really listen—and not just for an opening to make your pitch. Give yourself over to the kinds of questions you would ask if you were at a party, meeting someone you genuinely liked for the first time. Everything they're talking about is stuff you've been thinking about too. You keep asking questions because what they have to say is so compelling to you.

Really listen—and not just for an opening to make your pitch.

You don't have to fake it. People who are motivated to make their union more democratic tend to be curious about their co-workers, even those they don't much like. You are not going to like all of your co-workers, but you can still try to find something that connects you with them. Allow this warm interest in each and every co-worker to spring naturally from your commitment to building a stronger union.

ASK QUESTIONS PEOPLE CAN ANSWER

Start by asking people questions that they will know the answers to and can speak confidently about—like the questions Amy Calandrella asked in the elevator.

This doesn't necessarily mean asking people to list their problems at work. In fact, that may *not* be a question they can easily answer. Many people don't spend time thinking about problems because they don't think anything can be done to change things. They feel powerless.

So, in the beginning of the relationship, after you've gotten to know someone a bit—where they live, what's their family situation, what's important to them outside the job—it's good to let them tell you about their work. You could ask questions like:

- What do you do here?
- How long have you been here?
- How did you end up working here?
- What do you think about this place?
- What do you like about this job?
- Do you get to know the people you work most closely with?
- What do you think of the boss?
- What bothers you about working here?
- Are you thinking about leaving?

- Have you had better jobs or worse jobs in the past?
- Have you ever tried to do anything to improve things?
- What were the results of that?
- Who do you look up to in the workplace?
- Who do you trust?
- Who don't you trust?

None of this is small talk. All of it will help you get a sense of who this person is, in the context of this workplace. You are building up a picture of what it might take to invite this person into a collective process—that's your goal. Very often the minimum thing it would take is their feeling that there is someone in the union who has shown them some respect!

WHAT TO PAY ATTENTION TO AS YOU ARE ASKING QUESTIONS

The following pair of dialogues offers two contrasting versions of a conversation you might have with a co-worker early on—and as you begin to see that there's something they want to change about the workplace.

This scenario imagines that you're in a nonunion workplace. But you could take the same kind of approach in a unionized workplace.

In both examples, you're hoping to bring the worker into a process that leads toward collective action. But the first approach is an effort to lead your co-worker to a predetermined outcome. The second approach—the more effective one—is shaped by your respect for the worker's experience and what you're learning about their interests. The co-worker will feel the difference.

Example 1: Leading a co-worker toward a predetermined outcome

Q: What bothers you about working here?

A: It seems that new things are always being added to my list. Nothing taken off, just new duties added.

Q: Do you have a job description?

A: I don't know. I've never seen one.

Q: Could you ask for one?

A: I have no idea who I'd ask. My manager has only been here two months longer than me.

Q: Don't you think you need a job description?

A: I don't know. I've never had one, and I've worked six different jobs in the last 10 years.

Q: Probably it would be better if you had a job description, right? It would limit having new things added all the time.

A: I have no idea. If you say so.

Q: Did you know that if we had a union here, we could force management to write job descriptions and follow them?

A: I don't know about that. They seem to make up their own rules.

Q: Do you think some of your co-workers would be interested in a union? It would really give you power to change things.

A: [Shrug]

Example 2: Learning about a co-worker

Q: What bothers you about working here?

A: It seems that new things are always being added to my list. Nothing taken off, just new duties added.

Q: Can you give me an example?

A: Yesterday, I was stocking shelves and the manager told me I had to inventory a whole aisle of the store I'd never worked in before.

Q: What did you do?

A: I asked the manager for the stocking sheet for that aisle, but he gave me one that was six months old. It was really hard to complete it. Then he yelled at me for being slow.

Q: That's demeaning. Have you talked with any co-workers about this, about having new assignments piled on?

A: Oh yeah! We complain about it all the time.

Q: Have you ever talked about doing something to try and push back?

A: No way. Everyone's scared to say anything.

Q: Do you know three or four co-workers you could get together with—say, after work on a Friday—to just talk about it? What's everyone's experience, what are they scared of, whether there's something you could do about it?

A: Sure, we could talk. I don't know if it will do any good, but I can ask.

You are listening for a topic that really concerns them. In the first example, you leap in with your own solution. In the second example, you suggest getting a few people together to talk about a solution.

LISTEN FOR AN EXPRESSION OF UNION VALUES

Respect is about the character of the interaction; it's not about following a script. Good organizing begins with the belief that each co-worker has dignity, can think and plan, and can cooperate with others to fix problems.

Without this belief, we will default to expecting someone else to fix our problems—maybe the boss, maybe HR, maybe some charismatic politician. But that won't work, because in reality, these people are taking care of their own problems, not ours.

One way you might show your co-worker respect is by simply finding out how they're doing and especially *what* they are doing. It may seem that a co-worker is apathetic, clueless, or resigned to bad conditions. But in truth, nearly everyone will have tried something to protect themselves, improve things, or help others on the job.

You are looking for that special ingredient—it's going to be there in almost everyone you meet—that shows that they share a union value, such as compassion, cooperation, or independent thinking. When you see even a smidgeon of that, ask more about it!

Nearly everyone will have tried something to improve things or to help others on the job.

For example:

- I noticed you rolling your eyes when the supervisor was describing the new procedure. What was on your mind?
- You were really helpful when I ran into that problem. How did you figure that out?
- I saw you remind our new co-worker that she didn't have to take overtime work, even though the boss was pressuring her. How did that go?
- How do you manage to avoid all the cliques at work? It seems you're fair with everyone.

And keep it honest. Don't pander or flatter; just follow your own curiosity and respond to the leads you are offered in the conversation.

This kind of dialogue can be great for understanding your co-workers' values, motivations, and what they really care about. This is where you can find common ground and expand on it.