



**RIGHT TO THE CITY  
ALLIANCE**

**MARCH 2022**



# **Transformative Organizing Framework**

---

**PREPARED BY**  
Robbie Clark



# Table of Contents

---

- 03** Defining Transformative Organizing
- 04** Transformative Organizing vs. Pragmatic Organizing
- 06** Core Tenets of Transformative Organizing Theory
- 09** Transformative Organizing Principles
- 10** Transformative Organizing in Practice





# PART I: Defining Transformative Organizing

## **Transformative organizing transforms the system itself:**

Transformative Organizing is in radical opposition to the power structures of colonialism, cis-heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism. Its goal is to develop a new socio-political and economic structure along with liberated cultural values that center social and ecological well-being.

## **Transformative organizing transforms the community:**

Transformative Organizing redefines collective relationships. Instead of being pitted against each other, or alienated from each other because of our differences, transformative organizing seeks to build trusting, interdependent relationships and organizations through shared work, shared decision-making, and a commitment to deeply respect and engage each other in all of what makes us unique - linguistically, physically, socially, culturally and politically.

Transformative Organizing is about creating deep change at three levels simultaneously:

**How we structure society**

**How we relate to each other**

**How we are as people**

## **Transformative Organizing transforms the organizer:**

A transformative organizer understands that the same systems to which we are in opposition have shaped the beliefs and values that we have internalized ourselves. We have all been impacted by imperialism and the cultural values that go along with it, such as domination, exploitation, and hyper-individualism. In transformative organizing, we move from a place of replicating the negative and harmful behaviors that we have learned from living in this society to a place of developing conscious, intentional personal practices based on authenticity, accountability and compassion.



# PART II: Transformative Organizing vs. Pragmatic Organizing

---

Transformative organizing refers ultimately to a method of organizing that is based on a clearly articulated and transparent ideological framework that is specifically anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, and internationalist.

We believe that it is important to define and understand exactly what the idea of transformative organizing is because there are different ideas about what the right approach to organizing is.

Specifically, there is a disagreement between those who believe that organizing has to be rooted in a clear, leftist ideology, and those who feel like organizing should be “non-ideological” or “pragmatic.”

Transformative organizers critique the pragmatic, or Alinskyist, approach. Alinskyism refers to an approach that was promoted by organizer Saul Alinsky. Out of his work that started in Chicago and grew internationally, one of the key tenets is that the organizer should be non-ideological, without a political perspective, and that the community itself decides the aim of any organizing attempt, with the organizer acting as merely a neutral facilitator of the process.

Alinskyism was popular even among leftists, given that this key tenet appears to center the leadership of those most directly impacted by systems of oppression. “Meet people where they are” is a common movement refrain, but what happens if people’s leadership is not developed?



# Our Hypothesis:

---

**If national staff and member leaders commit to practicing transformative organizing, then we will have the collective capacity to support the proliferation of the praxis (theory +practice) of transformative organizing amongst our member organizations, thereby developing our ability to build the transformative power necessary to decommodify land and housing and win permanent, dignified homes for all.**

“...when pragmatic organizers choose not to frame their campaigns for immediate demands within fundamental structural challenges to racism, police brutality and imperialist wars or battles for LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights or basic democratic rights, they can isolate themselves from their community’s need for deep social transformation. In many cases pragmatic organizing, whether by its silence or its aggressive anti-Left ideology, conciliates with Empire-building.”

**- Eric Mann, Playbook for Progressives**





# PART III: Core Tenets of Transformative Organizing Theory

At the foundation of the theory of transformative organizing is an understanding of Marx's concepts of base and superstructure. It is the economic base of our society that dictates the superstructure, the values and norms of society that serve to replicate and reinforce the dominance of the base. It is this understanding that underpins the interrelatedness of the systems that we seek to transform, and the individual and organizations committed to transformation.

Ella Baker spent her entire adult life trying to “change that system.” Somewhere along the way she recognized that her goal was not a single “end” but rather an ongoing “means,” that is, a process. Radical change for Ella Baker was about a persistent and protracted process of discourse, debate, consensus, reflection, and struggle.

**- Barbara Ransby, Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement**

- Transformative Organizing Strategy includes interventions that shrink the power of the oppressive state.
- Transforming society requires ideological, strategic, mass-based organizing. It requires organization(s).
- A transformative organizer constructs conjunctural analysis, a politically sharp explanation of the world, country and society that we live in, in a given moment.
- A transformative organizer strives to win non-reformist reforms - material wins that shift the balance of power towards the power of the people, our institutions, our ideas, investing to the benefit of humanity and to the living collective.
- Transformative organizing builds our individual and collective capacity to govern. It allows us to practice decision making with collective wellness at the center.



- A transformative organizer advances towards their vision on multiple fronts balancing the short and responsive work with the long and strategic work. The work and ability it takes to manage this balance is as important as the ends of the spectrum.
- Transformative Organizing centers leadership of the most oppressed, exploited and strategically placed classes - the leadership of working class people of color and organizations.
- Transformative Organizing happens through praxis - an interplay of work and reflection in theory, when organizers and organizations are in an ongoing conversation to sharpen the answer to the question of why they do the work that they do.
- Transformation begins with self awareness. The abolition of oppression requires that we engage society's structures, whereas the extinguishing of suffering requires that we engage ourselves.
- A transformative organizer chooses to practice with intention to align how they show up in the world with their politics.



- Transformative organizing articulates an alternative vision of society, one where we break up with binaries, uphold feminist practices and embrace interdependence.
- Transformative organizing aligns with Transformative Justice, a practice of responses to harm and violence that do not rely on state systems or systemic violence, that simultaneously cultivate the conditions that prevent harm and violence. These responses work to meet the immediate needs of the harm and violence in a way that does not undermine our long-term visions of justice, freedom and liberation.
- Transformative organizing requires that we make transformative demands, demands that address the root cause(s) of a problem in society, rather than transactional demands, which address only the symptoms of a problem.

Transform yourself  
to transform the  
world.  
- Grace Lee Boggs



# Transformative Organizing Dialectics Diagram

This image demonstrates the development of the individual organizer and how it is both impacting and impacted by the organization, which is both impacting and impacted by systemic change. Systemic change is also impacting and impacted by the individual organizer. The organization is the vehicle for systemic change, and the midpoint in the infinity symbol.

“From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.”  
- (adapted from Marx)







# PART IV: Transformative Organizing Principles

---

In order to practice transformative organizing, we ground ourselves in the following principles to guide our practice:

**Interdependence** - we need each other and we make progress together. Oppression seeks to divide and isolate us, building interdependent relationships combats alienation and aids us in building the power necessary for transformation.

**Political Development** - we continually train ourselves to do the work effectively. We commit to developing our capacity to learn from our comrades and share what we have to teach with our comrades and our community.

**Dialectics** - change does not happen in a linear way, nor does it just happen on one level at a time. Changes in one aspect of the work, will necessitate changes in other aspects of the work. We commit to developing the capacity to navigate the tensions present at the sites of change we encounter through the work.

**Practice is Power** - we choose to be intentional with our practice, and see it as a foundational part of the work to be a transformative organizer. We commit to align our actions and behaviors with our beliefs and to develop our emotional capacity through practice.

**Principled Struggle** - we commit to struggle as a means to build unity. Generative conflict is a community building tool, allowing us to build trust amongst each other.

**An Experimental Approach** - we are developing this model of organizing as we use it, making the road while we're walking. We commit to reflection, debrief, and evaluation as foundational activities to identify, document and promote lessons and best practices.



# PART V: Transformative Organizing in Practice

---

Transformative Organizing is practiced at the individual, organizational and movement level. To make this an accurate reflection of our alliance model of transformative organizing, we must build it through collective intentional practice.

## Ideological Capacities

- Critical thinker
- Thinks things through to the best of their ability/knowledge
- Seeks to be an expert
- Is constantly developing, understands that they are and takes agency in their individual development

---

## Political Capacities

- Understands that this is a protracted struggle
- Extra active listener
- Holds complexity/Multiple things at once - outside of the binary thinker, able to hold opposites at the same time
- Is flexible, responds to the conditions, or the current conjecture of the present moment - is able to make assessments
- Doesn't need to know it all to make the move, yet still strives to get as much information as possible

---

## Organizational Capacities

- Keeps track of their work; their numbers; members; victories and lessons
- Takes time for reflection, to document lessons and to sharpen their interventions/the work that they do
- Asks for help/ strives to understand interdependence
- Seeks to master their own capacity by measuring, documentation and lessons learned from past work

---

## Social/Emotional Capacities

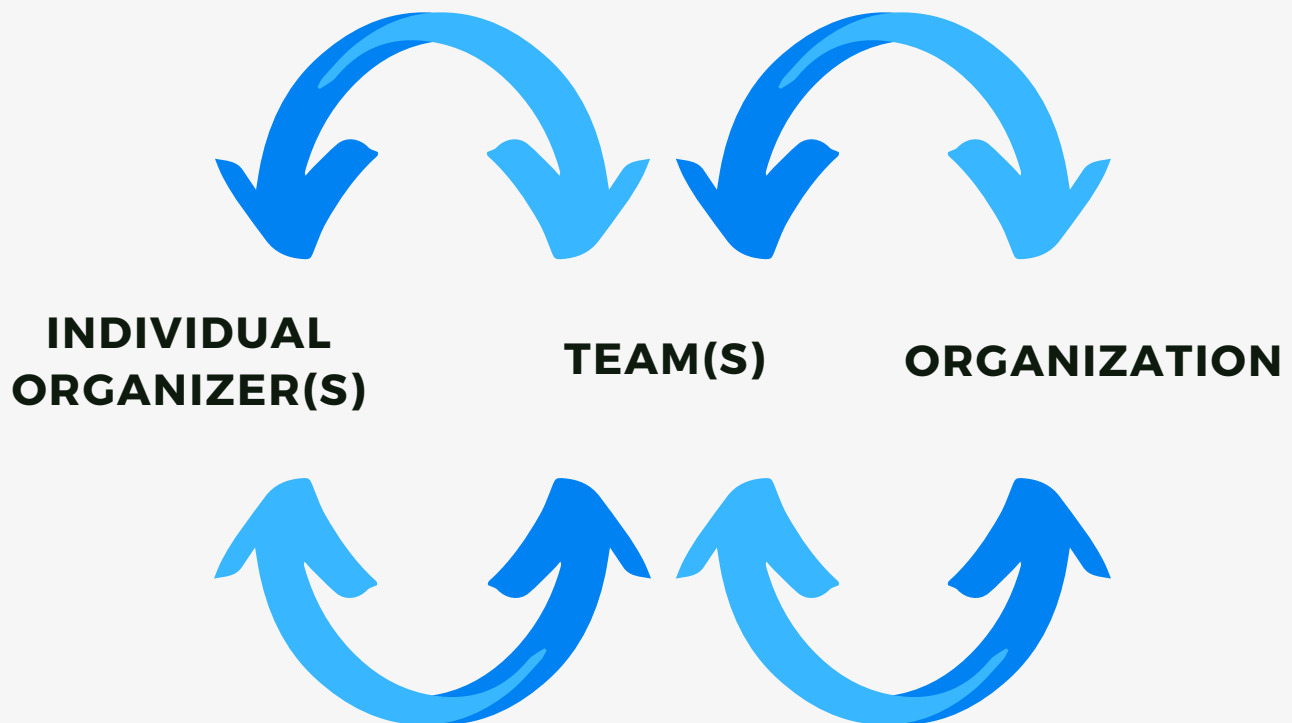
- Observing yourself, to know what you need to show up as your best each day
- Combats liberalism - is candid, honesty and grounded in their critique and in their affirmation
- Principled struggle, generative conflict
- Emotionally self aware and nurtures their capacity to own their emotions (also called emotional intelligence or maturity)
- Tries to do it all, yet understands that they cannot do it all - sets boundaries and respects the boundaries of others

## Organizational Practice Dialectic Diagram

---

This image illustrates the development of the individual organizers as connected to the development of the team, and the organization. All of them are simultaneously acting on each other, causing the tensions that pull and push along our cycle of development:

We are each other's business;  
We are each other's harvest;  
We are each other's  
magnitude and bond  
- Gwendolyn Brooks





# How do we practice this?

Know **MY ORGANIZATIONAL** (Individual) work

Know the work of **OTHER PROGRAM TEAMS**

Connect **MY TEAM'S WORK** with the Work of **OTHER PROGRAM TEAMS**

Connect **OUR WORK** with the Work of **MOVEMENT WORK**

Know **MY TEAM'S** work

Know about the work of **OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL TEAMS**

Connect **PROGRAM WORK** with **OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL WORK**





In the matrix below, are five areas of work that are unique to our alliance and how we organize ourselves. For each one, there is the question of what is transformative about the practice of that work.

**What is the transformative potential of these unique internal initiatives?**

What is transformative about our practice of...	Language Justice	Collective Care	Governance	Infrastructure as Strategy	Base Building
At the Individual level: are there additional individual practices we would add based on lessons in the ways we practice this work?					
At the Organizational level: what organizational practices embody a transformative approach in this area of work?					
At the Movement level: what is the vision for how this work shifts the movement from our position?					