

Organizing Project I: Constituency, Goals, Power

Introduction

Launching your organizing project requires a clear idea, first, of who is your constituency, their goals, and how they can get the power they need to achieve these goals. Second, you need to know by when those goals must be achieved, have a sense of the steps along the way, and by when you must begin. This week we address the first question. Next week we address the second question. The understanding that you start out with may change as your project unfolds. This is fine. The future is uncertain. But it is very hard to achieve a purpose if you have little idea of what that purpose is to begin with.

Constituency

Constituents are the people at the center of our work, the people whom we organize, whose leadership we develop, and to whom we are accountable. It makes a big difference whether we think of the people with whom we work as constituents, clients, or customers. *Constituent* derives from the Latin for "stand together" - people who associate on behalf of common interests, contribute resources to acting on those interests, and who are entitled to voice in deciding how. *Clients* - from the Latin for "one who leans on another" - are people with an interest in a service others can provide, but are not expected to contribute resources to a common effort, nor are they entitled to decision making voice. *Customers* - a term derived from trade - have an interest in a good or service to which they gain access in exchange for resources in which the seller has an interest.

Clients and Customers are external to the organization that serves them, whereas constituents are the heart of the organization. Constituents "join" an organization to become "members", just as "citizens" are members of a democracy. Voters in a particular district are constituents of an elected official. Workers who do certain kinds of work or are employed by particular employers are constituents of a union (why wouldn't they be constituents of their employer?). People with environmental concerns are constituents of environmental organizations.

Based on economist Albert Hirschman's famous distinction among exit, voice, and loyalty, it is constituents who can influence the organizations to which they belong through *voice*, making themselves heard through internal means, whereas customers and clients can exert influence only through *exit*, taking their resources elsewhere.¹² Finally, a *community* - people who share a

¹² Albert Hirschman, (1970), *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press), p.16.

commonality – is different from a *constituency* – people capable of standing together to act on behalf of their commonality. The organizer’s job is to turn a community into a constituency.

Goals

So what do you need to know about your constituency? The first question you have to answer is why they might need – or want – to organize. You also need to be clear on why you want to organize them, but this is not the same thing. Do your constituents face a challenge to their values? How do you know? What are their aspirations? Is it enough of a challenge that they might have an interest in organizing? And if they could have an interest in organizing, what might the results, a successful outcome, look like?

Although the only way an organizer can begin to answer these questions is by entering into relationships with members of his or her constituency, it is important to begin with a working “hypothesis”, based, perhaps, on your past experience. The tools of social science can also give you some idea of where to look, what kinds of questions to ask, and how to think about getting to know your constituency.

One such set of tools is illustrated in *Chart #1: Needs, Values, and Interests*. Some psychologists use a *needs* metaphor to describe dynamics at work within us. Clayton Aldefer characterizes our needs as interactive and focused on existence, relationships and growth.¹³ Existence needs are about physical safety. Relational needs are about social safety (recognition, belonging, etc.). Growth needs are about learning and development. Although at core, our needs matter, we attach value to these needs – and ways to satisfy them – based on what we learn growing up, especially the culture in which we learn how to interact with others. And because we are purposeful creatures who find themselves in different life circumstances, we translate our values into purposes – or interests – on behalf of which we mobilize our resources.

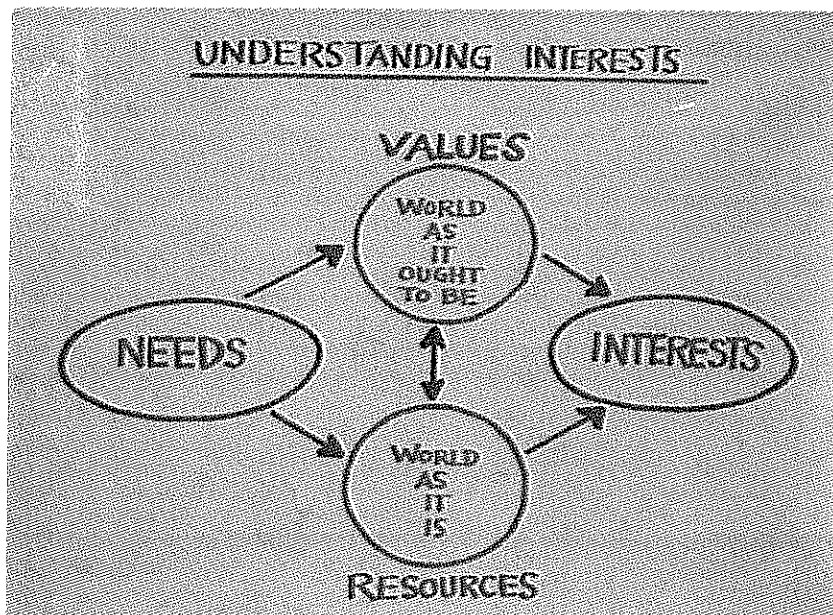
Threats to those values – or unrealized opportunities – may give us an interest in organizing on their behalf. Having learned to value economic security, for example, and had access to the resources to devote years to schooling, we conceive an interest in completing a graduate degree to get a good job. But what if our school doesn’t offer the instruction we need to get a good job? We might have a shared interest in finding ways we can get access to that instruction. If our values shape our broad life goals, our interests specify outcomes on which we focus in strategic pursuit of those goals. An interest, however, which in Latin means, “to exist among,” is defined in relation to others. Although interests we may have in accumulating wealth or of power can be very powerful, unless we experience wealth

¹³ C. Alderfer, (1972), *Existence, Relatedness and Growth*. (New York, Free Press).

and/or power as ends in themselves, they satisfy only if linked to other sources of value. Most of us have interests in many domains, although some may be more immediate than others: family, community, work, religious beliefs, cultural or recreational activities, and politics. Learning to interpret the interests of our constituents – and our own interests-- and the values and resources shaping them -- is critical to understanding the role of organizing.

This approach to the work of social change focuses on the role people have as agents in creating change, not simply as recipients of "social forces." As agents we remember, imagine, choose, and reflect on our choices. Although "social forces" influence decisions we make, we make - and are responsible for - decisions that shape "social forces." Because we are not atomized individuals, floating somewhere above the social world, we make decisions interdependently with others, whose decisions also affect our own. How can we understand the "drug problem", for example, without taking into consideration the myriad dealers, smugglers, and producers who mobilize to frustrate every attempt to solve it?

Chart #1: Needs, Values, and Interests.



Leadership

Although your constituency is the central focus of your work, your goal as an organizer is to draw leadership from within that constituency, with whom you can work to organize the whole. Their work, like your own, is to "accept responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of

uncertainty.” They thus facilitate the work of their constituency to achieve its purposes, interact with others on behalf of a constituency, and are accountable to their constituency. Leaders who manage bureaucratic organizations, by contrast, often have no relationship with clients or customers. Leadership in the organizing context could include club officers, union stewards, members of a parish council, etc. The full time or part time people who do the day-to-day work of the organization may also serve as leaders, whether volunteer or paid, even if not drawn from the constituency, providing they are accountable to it. Examples include full time local union presidents, chairs of mission committees, and the people who pass out leaflets on behalf of a candidate. Most organizations have a formal governing “body” that decides policy, makes major staff choices, and may or may not be involved in day-to-day activities. Constituency organizations choose governing bodies that overlap with their leadership. In bureaucratic organizations, the governing body may be self-selected, selected by outside groups, or by financial providers - but rarely include leaders drawn from among their clients.

Your work with these leaders will be to enable their learning of the five practices you are learning: story telling, relationship building, structuring, strategizing, and action. By developing their leadership you, as an organizer, not only can get to “get to scale.” You are also creating a new capacity for action – power – within the constituency you are organizing. This is a critical difference between organizing and other forms of problem solving. To the extent that powerlessness is responsible for challenges your constituents face, developing the leadership to create new organization, creates power where there was none - thus getting at one of the root causes of the problem you are trying to solve. It also means that the individuals who become involved in the work have an opportunity to develop their own skills. Consider Aldefer’s needs theory to see why this could be of such value.

Opposition, Supporters, Others

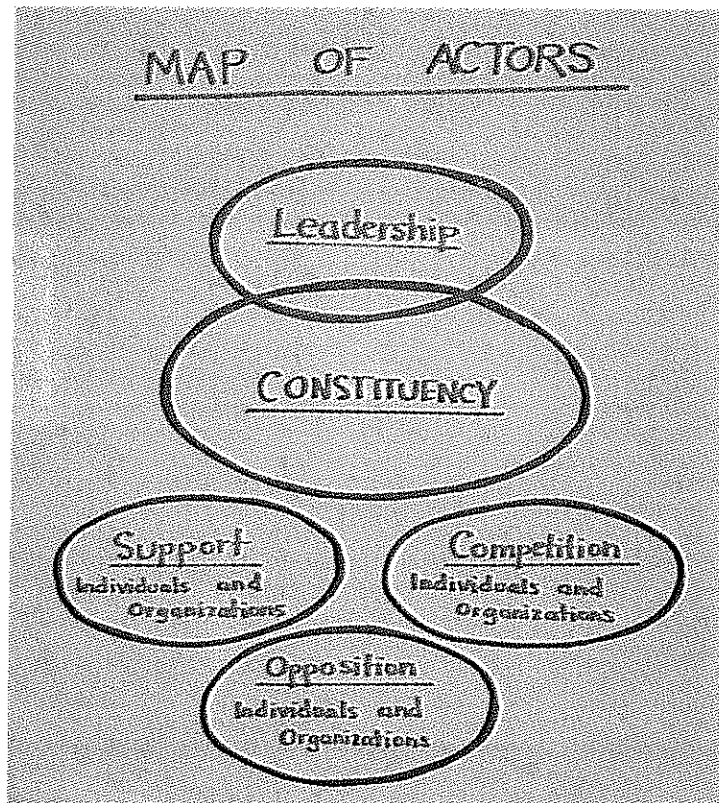
- **Opposition** - Individuals or organizations may pursue interests in conflict with those of our constituency. The opposition may not be obvious, sometimes emerging clearly only in the course of a campaign. Employers’ interests usually conflict with employees’ interests, a tobacco company’s interests conflict with those of an anti-smoking group, a street gang’s interests conflict with those of a church youth group, interests of a Republican Congressional candidate conflict with those of the Democratic candidate in the same district, etc.

- **Supporters** - People who find it in their interest to encourage an organization’s work financially, politically, voluntarily, etc. Although they may not be part of the constituency or leadership, they may sit on governing boards. Church organizations and foundations, for example, provided a great deal of support for the civil rights movement.

- Competitors/Collaborators - These are individuals or organizations with whom we may share some interests, but not others. They may target the same constituency we have, the same sources of support, or face the same opposition. Two unions trying to organize the same work force may compete or collaborate. Two community groups trying to serve the same constituency may compete or collaborate in their fundraising.

- Organizers – Where do the organizers fit in? Organizers play leadership roles in the organizations they work with. They may be elected by constituents or appointed by a governing board. Their primary focus, however, is building the organization itself by developing more leaders.

Actors Chart #2



Power?

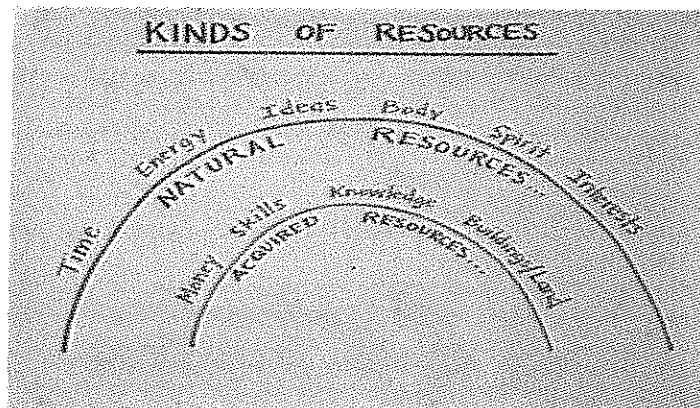
So what does "power" have to do with all this? Dr. King defined power as the "ability to achieve purpose." "Whether it is good or bad," he said, "depends on the purpose." And in Spanish the word for

power is simply *poder* - to be able to, to have the capacity to. So if power simply describes capacity, why, as Alinsky asks, is it the “p-word” - something we don’t admit we want, acknowledge others have, concede matters to us or even talk about?

Power and Resources

We mobilize resources on behalf of our interests. A resource is anything we can use to achieve something else. As shown in Actors Chart #3, natural resources are those we more or less came into the world with: our bodies, our minds, our spirit, our time, and our talents. Acquired resources are distributed far less widely – land, skills, information, money, equipment, status. The fact that some resources are scarcer than others and less equally distributed influences whose interests get served. Different kinds of resources also behave in different ways. Albert Hirschman observed that some resources grow as they are used while others diminish with use.¹⁴ Resources that grow with use – like relationships, commitment, understanding -- he called “moral” resources, while those that diminish with use -- money, materials -- he called “economic” resources. What kinds of resources did the colonists use in their boycotts and their tea parties?

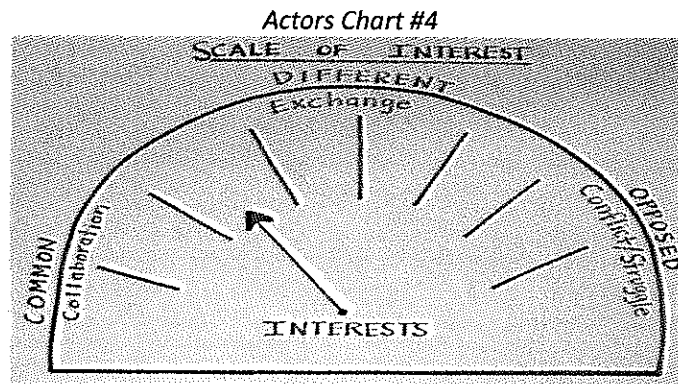
Actors Chart #3



We live in a world of competition and collaboration with others. As shown in Actors Chart #4 some interests are shared, some are different, and some are in conflict. Many resources are limited and access to them is often extremely unequal. The scarcer the resources we need to mobilize on behalf of our interests - and the more skewed their distribution - the more likely we are to find ourselves in conflict with others. Conflicts of interest are sometimes obvious. We may want to keep our job to support our family and send our children to school, but our employer may want to lay us off to move the plant to

¹⁴ Albert Hirschman, (1984), "Against Parsimony: Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse," American Economic Association Papers and Proceedings, 93.

another place where production costs less. Sometimes conflicts are not so obvious. Allocating the funds for better public schools may require raising the taxes of those paying to send their children to private schools. Keeping kids off drugs may threaten the interests of dealers who rely on getting them onto drugs. Recruiting kids for nonviolent conflict resolution may threaten gangs who are recruiting them for something else. Who wins when there is a conflict of interest? Why?



Common interests are not always obvious either. Even when they are obvious, as Walker points out, we don't always act on them.¹⁵ For example, in the fight over the health care system a few years ago, most Americans told pollsters they had a "common interest" in health care reform. But the insurance industry had an interest in stopping health care reform. They mobilized far more effectively than "the public." This is evidence of the well-known "collective action problem." All things being equal, those with narrow interests and lots of resources find it easier to mobilize than those with broad interests and fewer resources.

How do you think the interests of your constituency can be addressed? Why haven't they been? Is it a collaboration problem - one we could solve if enough people realized they had a common interest in pooling their resources in trying to solve it? Or is it a conflict of interest problem - one we can solve only if the persons whose interests aren't heard find the means to assert those interests more effectively?

Considering your constituency, do its members have a "moral" problem – a character weaknesses to be reformed by moral exhortation? Do they have an educational problem – one that could be solved with better teaching? Or do they have a "relational" problem – one that could be solved if they just developed more "social capital"? Consider the institutional world within which these individuals live. Is the problem "technological" – one we could solve with the expertise to manage institutional resources more efficiently or design better procedures? Is it "informational" – a problem we can solve by using research and advocacy skills to communicate with those who have the resources

¹⁵ Jack L. Walker, (1991), *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America*. (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press).

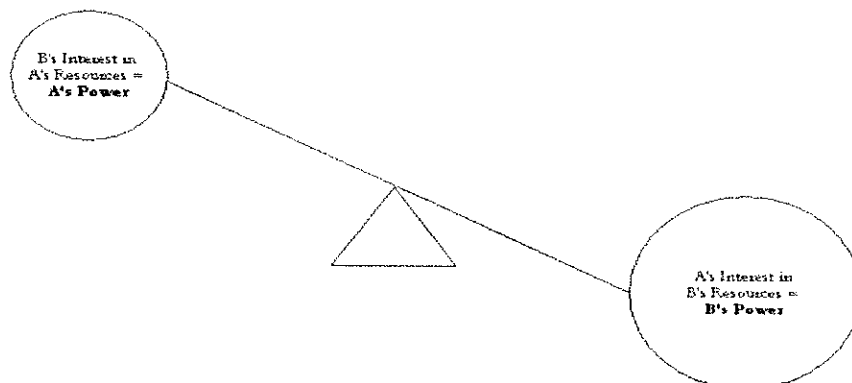
to solve the problem? However, if it is a problem of resources, why should those whom the current distribution favors redistribute them?

Relational Power

Richard Emerson argues that power is not a thing, an attribute, a quality, a characteristic or a trait -- it is a relationship.^{16,17} Its effect emerges in our interaction with each other in terms of interests and resources. Sometimes we have access to all the resources we need, but more often than not addressing our interests requires access to the resources of another. This creates an opportunity for exchange: I trade resources that I have that the other person needs to address their interests, for resources they have that I need to address my own. At the most basic level, however, if my interest in your resources exceeds your interest in my resources, you acquire influence over me. On the other hand, if your interest in my resources exceeds my interest in your resources, I acquire influence over you. And that's where power comes from.

For example, my friend and I want to go to the movies and he has a car, but no money for gas, while I have money for gas, but no car. Based on this mutuality of interests we can influence each other to act interdependently, enhancing the "power" to which we have access together. We have created greater capacity to address our shared interests. Bernard Loomer and Jean Baker Miller describe this as "power to" or "power with" or interdependency.¹⁸ Mobilizing power in this way creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. New immigrants, for example, may pool their savings in a credit union to make low interest loans available to its members -- increasing their financial power. "Power with" is the result of social cooperation and our capacity to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone.

Actors: Chart 5



¹⁶ R. Emerson, (1962), "Power-Dependence Relations." *American Sociological Review*, 27: 31-41.

¹⁷ R. Emerson, (1962), "Power-Dependence Relations." *American Sociological Review*, 27: 31-41.

¹⁸ B. M. Loomer and Jean Baker Miller, (1976), "Two Kinds of Power," The D.R. Sharpe Lecture on Social Ethics, October 29, 1975." *Criterion* 15(1): 11-29.

But what if four of us want to go to the movies and my friend's car only has room for 2 passengers. We could draw straws to see who gets to go and who doesn't, and those who get to go, each contribute half of the gas. But what if my friend decides that he has an interest not only in going to the movies, but also in making some money from the deal? It turns out that he has control over one resource, his car, that we all need, but no one of us controls the resources he needs, gas money. This imbalance of need – or dependency – gives him the leverage to exercise power “over” us by offering the two spots in the car to the highest bidders, regardless of how much the gas costs. But we still have an option, depending on how badly he wants to go to the movies. All four of us can get together and agree that we will only pay the cost of the gas and not a penny more. If he wants to go badly enough, we will have rebalanced the situation, turning it back into one of power “with”.

We often describe power used in this way as exercising “power over” another. I find a way to make another dependent on me so that I can use this dependency to dominate his or her interests. For example, an employer who controls most of the opportunities for income (resources) in a “company” town can exercise a great deal of power over individual workers. No one of whose individual resources (labor) is overly valuable to the employer. He can thus get access to their resources (labor) in exchange for far less of his resources (low wages). Thus, although the worker may “voluntarily” enter into the exchange, the benefits of the exchange will accrue mostly to the employer because he has the power advantage. And this is one reason workers form unions - to correct this kind of power imbalance.

You can uncover the power relations by asking – and getting the answers to - four questions to “help track down the power”:

1. What are the interests of your constituency?
2. Who holds the resources needed address these interests?
3. What are the interests of the actors who hold these resources?
4. What resources does your constituency hold which the other actors require to address their interests?

Two Kinds of Power: Collaboration and Claims Making

Both kinds of power – power with and power over – come into play in organizing. In organizing based on “collaborative” strategy, we try finding ways to generate more power to achieve common interests by creating more interdependency among the actors who share those interests. Examples include cooperative childcare, credit unions, etc. This kind of power can be used to solve problems that result from a failure to mobilize around common interests. On the other hand, organizing based on “claims making” strategy, necessary where conflicts of interest exist, requires creating the power to alter relations of dependency and domination. If workers combine their resources in a union they may

be able to balance their individual dependency on their employer with his dependency on their labor as a whole. This way a dependent “power over” relationship can be turned into an interdependent “power to” relationship.

One key to successful organizing is understanding that generating the power to successfully challenge “power over” may require creating lots of “power to” first. Many unions, for example, began with death benefit societies, sickness funds, and credit unions. On the other hand, many efforts that begin generating “power to” wind up challenging “power over” as the conflicts of interest that were not apparent begin to surface. The strongest opposition to a recent effort to create a community credit union in New York came from some actors no one had considered -- the loan sharks and their political allies.

Three Faces of Power

Why are conflicts of interest not always apparent? As John Gaventa, citing Steven Lukes argues power operates on multiple levels, as illustrated in Actors Chart #4.¹⁹The first “face” of power - the visible face - can be detected by observing who wins among decision makers faced with choices as to how to allocate resources. Attend a board meeting, city council meeting, legislative session, or corporate board meeting and you will see one side win and another side lose -- giving you a pretty clear indication of who exercises power and who doesn't.

But there's more to it than that. Who decides what gets on the agenda to be decided? And who decides who sits at the table making decisions? Lukes calls deciding what's on the agenda and who sits at the table the second “face” of power. It can be observed when there are groups clamoring to get issues on the agenda, but can't get past the “gatekeeper” -- the situation that African Americans faced during many years of apparent “racial harmony” before the civil rights movement. There was no lack of groups trying to bring racial issues before Congress, but these issues rarely got to the point of congressional debate because those controlling the agenda kept them off the floor.

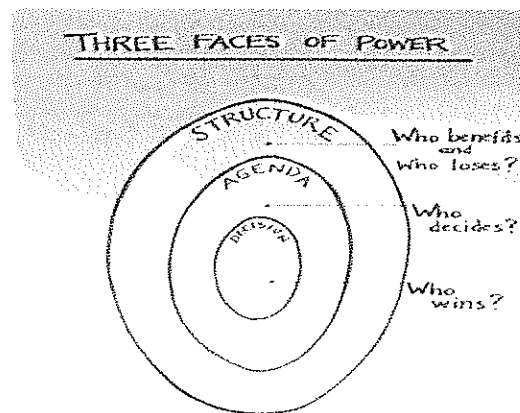
The third “face” of power is harder to detect. Sometimes the power relationships that shape our world are so deeply embedded that we “take them for granted.” Before the women's movement, for example, few people claimed job discrimination against women was “an issue.” Women's interests were not being voted down in Congress (there were almost no women in Congress) and women's groups were not picketing outside, unable to place their issue on the agenda. Yet women occupied subordinate positions in most spheres of public life. Were they “content” with this situation? Perhaps. But sometimes, although people would like things to be different, they can't imagine that they could be -- enough, at least, to take the risks to make them so. To detect this face of power, Lukes says, you have to look deeper -- beyond the question of who decides or who gets on the agenda, and look at who benefits and who loses in the allocation of valued resources. If you then ask why the losers generally lose and the

¹⁹ J. Gaventa, (1982), *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. (Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press).

winners generally win, you may discover the power disparity at work. (This can be tricky because the winners always claim they "deserve" to win while the losers "deserve" to lose, and sometimes they convince the losers).

From this perspective, take another look at your project and ask, "What is the source of the challenges your constituency faces?" Do your constituents lack the power they need to assert their interests? Do they lack resources? Or could they be using the resources they have better? Could they use them better by collaborating with one another (power with)? Could they use them more effectively by using them to influence the interests of others whose resources they need? Did someone fail to allocate resources, as in voting down a school-funding proposal? Were the concerns of those with similar interests kept off the agenda? Or do people just assume that this is how things are, so it is wise to make the best of themes legitimated? A couple of years ago, a student asked why so many Harvard students do public service, but abandon it in their professional lives. The most common explanation was that her generation just "doesn't care." She noticed that despite very elaborate recruiting rituals each fall for investment banks and consulting firms, virtually no one was recruiting for careers in public service. She thought this was an example of the third face of power and organized a "careers and social responsibility" conference in response.

Actors: Chart 6



Power and Right

So what about "power" and "right"? What is the relationship between the two? This is the question Thucydides wants us to consider with his account of the Melian debate. Is being "right" enough? Is insisting on one's "rightness" always responsible? What's the relationship between being "powerful" and being "right"? What do you think?

Organizing power begins with the commitment by the first person who wants to make it happen. Without this commitment, there are no resources with which to begin. Commitment is

observable as action. The work of organizers begins with their acceptance of the responsibility to challenge others to do the same.

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QUESTIONS

Constituency, Goals, and Power

1. Draw a map of your project that places your constituency at the center? How would you draw your leadership? An opposition? Supporters? Others?
2. What challenges to the values of your constituency do you plan to address? What interests might they have in organizing? How do you know? What outcomes might you achieve on behalf of those interests?
3. What kind of power will they need to achieve these outcomes? Power with or power over? Where will they get this power?
 1. What are the INTERESTS of your constituency?
 2. Who has the RESOURCES needed to address these INTERESTS?
 3. What are the INTERESTS of those who have the RESOURCES?
 4. What RESOURCES does the constituency have which could affect these INTERESTS?
4. What have you observed about the three faces of power in your project? Is there anything that you or others can do to reveal them?