



*A Union of Professionals*

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***Getting Members Involved:  
Lessons from the AFT  
MC/IO Program***



## *Why is membership involvement so important?*

- ✓ If we value a “culture of organizing” that builds strong, member-centered local unions, then membership involvement is essential.
- ✓ An involved membership is the true source of the union’s power.
- ✓ Involvement provides the ***relationships*** and ***experiences*** that create unionists.

This demands that local unions approach ***organizing*** as a ongoing activity--*not something that has already been done.*



## *Simply defined . . .*

- **Organizing is . . .** The process of turning potential members into members, members into activists, activists into leaders.
- **It is most successful . . .** When led as a continuous process, primarily at the worksite level, person to person and focused on issues.



# *Internal organizing is . . .*

## **ENGAGEMENT**

*Person is given reason to become interested in/pay attention to the union..*



## **ACTIVATION / RECRUITMENT & RETENTION**

*Person begins voluntary action in support of the union  
Person joins and remains a member.*



## **INDUCTION**

*Person is oriented to union/comes to know its history, structure, values, etc.*



## **CONTINUAL ACTIVATION**

*Person continues voluntary action in support of the union.*



## **SECONDARY LEADERSHIP**

*Person assumes a formal leadership role.  
(Building site team, committee and task force work, etc.)*



## **PRIMARY LEADERSHIP**

*Person advances to highest levels of union leadership.  
(Site rep, area or program coordinator, union officer, etc.)*



## *Consider these challenges . . .*

- Without fair share, AFT local unions struggle to build membership beyond 50%. Many large locals with agency fee seeing larger and larger numbers of “fee payers.”
- Number one concern of most AFT local union leaders? Low levels of membership involvement. Aging of core leadership. No “bench.”
- Seismic demographic shift within AFT. *Example: One half of UFT’s members have been on the job five years or less!* New generation of membership with no “union experience” of their own.
- MC/IO polling and focus groups reveal alarming disconnects between the union and its potential members/members.



## *The key disconnects . . .*

### **Who did this to us?**

- Introduction to union not spoken of as a positive experience. Union not seen as a source of support by new employees.
- Union is “they”—not “we”—and nearly invisible at the worksite.
- Functional view of the union vs. a substantive one.
- Union membership is a passive proposition, more like “buying insurance” than being part of a “community of colleagues united for the common good.”



## *The key disconnects (continued)*

- Union is to protect people from bad things—not a means to accomplish good things.
- Garfield the cat, the Yeti, a hibernating bear, a salmon swimming upstream and a gnat are among the animals that would describe the union.
- Union involvement? In what? View of it as high stakes, high commitment undertaking rife with negative repercussions.
- **Apathy and anti-union sentiment are not the problems. Lack of information and personal connection to the union are!**



## Transactional vs. Transformational

Rational	• Psychological
Benefits, services	• Issues
Passive	• Active
Marketing, sales	• Relationship, experience
Talking, selling	• Listening, connecting
Event	• Ongoing activity
Union is <i>protection</i>	• Union is <i>power</i>
Members <i>join</i> the union	• Members <i>take a stand!</i>
<i>Member</i>	• <i>Unionist</i>



## *The case for the transformational model:*

- Most convincing arguments for membership/involvement suggest a high involvement union active on the issues.
- General understanding that numbers create power.
- Members/potential members prefer a “Statement B” union (community of colleagues vs. insurance policy).
- Their message to the union is an “if-then” statement in which attention to the issues will result in membership/activism.



## *Key questions . . .*

- Do new employees receive a quality introduction to their union? Do we recruit (transact)? Or, do we organize (transform)?
- Does the union clearly articulate a substantive, issues-focused message that inspires commitment and activism?
- Is union membership presented as an active proposition? Do we create things to do in order to get people doing things? Do we present a continuum of involvement choices that appeal to both veteran activists and “newbies.”
- Is the worksite and the workday the primary reference point for members with their union? Do we focus adequately on worksite- and job-specific strategies and plans for organizing?
- What is the quality of the worksite leadership structure? Do worksite leaders actually function as organizers?
- Do we place the highest premium as possible on one-on-one communication and listening? For new employees, is there regular, sustained personal contact over time that is relevant to their needs?
- Is there a balance between servicing and organizing? Are we looking hard enough for organizing ways to do things?



## ***Discussion circle question:***

**Reflecting on today's workshop, can you identify specific actions you can take to boost involvement in your local union?**

**What are they?**



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