

Serving, organizing, and empowering communities of color

Best practices for aligning research, advocacy, and activism

By [Angela Lang](#) • June 15, 2022

Summary: Improving economic opportunities and well-being in communities of color requires more than data and research. It requires grassroots groups that reject the transactional nature of electoral campaigns in favor of humility, deep listening, year-round engagement, and love. Only by questioning assumptions and organizing people around the issues they prioritize can you build trust and lasting change. Grassroots groups that want to truly advance policies that serve our communities' needs must heed the following lessons learned at Black Leaders Organizing Communities in Milwaukee:

- **Reject a transactional approach to organizing.** A transactional approach to organizing—whereby a community member is seen only as a donor, a vote, or a person whose story you can exploit—is not only deeply offensive, but also not sustainable.
- **Build campaigns around what community members themselves say they want.** Organizers cannot assume that we know what people want—or that we know better than they do what they need to improve their lives.
- **Listen to the community and implement what you are hearing.** Really listening to the community is like the golden rule of organizing, but it is helpful only if you actually implement what you're hearing and use community feedback to guide your work and your strategy.
- **Engage in year-round organizing.** Communities of color continue to be targets of voter

suppression efforts and face roadblocks to civic participation. To compensate for these additional challenges, you need more time to talk to people.

- **Don't let the structural challenges in their lives prevent you from working with directly impacted people.** People who have faced the barriers you are trying to eliminate are not there to exploit or tokenize but are real, full people whose humanity and valuable lessons you must recognize.

Introduction: Examining what is really needed to improve the health and well-being of communities of color

What does it look like for your community to thrive? What would your neighbor say? What would your friends or family say? Are you sure they'd say that? Why do you think that? What assumptions are you making? Just by asking yourself these follow up questions, you already have thought more critically than some policy researchers or campaign consultants.

I am the founder and executive director of Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, a civic engagement organization devoted to building long-term political power and increasing economic opportunities for members of the Black community in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin. Through coordinated political action we work on a multitude of issues, including criminal justice reform, civic engagement and participation, and other community-focused issues.

We have found that if we are going to truly advance policies that improve the health and well-being of communities of color then we need to question our assumptions. Every day we make assumptions that we think are true. We make assumptions about a community we don't know or don't belong to, but we also make assumptions about a community that we do belong to. Despite being a part of a community, we can still get some assumptions wrong. Our communities are not a monolith and we can't treat them like they are.

My experience as a Black woman doesn't mean that I can make assumptions about the Black community as a whole. I only have one lived experience and one perspective. We all need "gut checks" on our own assumptions. Real change means putting egos aside and listening. Listening is also more strategic than assuming that we know what people want. Think about how much easier it is to organize someone around the issues and needs *they* have identified, versus trying to get them to buy into your agenda or an idea a funder said you should tackle. I personally would much rather work on the issues the community has

identified versus trying to persuade them to care about something else. Persuasion to external priorities is also not a sustainable model for building long-term power.

The focus on listening is particularly important to organizing, which is very different from mobilizing. Mobilizing usually is an action centered on a short-term goal, not the long fight. As in, “We just need bodies at this event.” Actual organizing—centered around listening—makes the work stronger. Community residents and leaders who see you working on their issues are more likely to trust the process and be involved in the future. And for people who have consistently been left out of the process, the chance to be heard can be a win in and of itself. In contrast, turning out a group of people for an action to satisfy a grant or some other external goal is a one-time success with no legs. It leads to a cycle of having to rebuild the wheel—i.e., secure the support—EVERY. SINGLE. TIME. People want to see results before they become part of a movement.

But even listening isn’t enough.

“You can’t organize Black people if you don’t love Black people,” someone once said to me. I repeat this in almost every presentation I give. It’s such a simple yet often overlooked concept. The world is dark these days and everything feels extreme. Being in a constant state of urgency can lead to a focus on winning by any means necessary. And that focus can give rise to harmful things like “the white savior complex”—when white people work on issues through the lens of saving others versus helping to empower people. White saviors tend to take up space that isn’t theirs while “just trying to help.”

In this essay I highlight the groundwork that must be done to truly advance policies that serve our communities’ needs. Taking the following steps will enable grassroots groups like ours to channel the actual needs and wants of our communities back to and inform those designing policy proposals.

Disrupt the transactional nature of electoral organizing

If we are organizing Black people as if we truly love Black people, that means we don’t treat people like they are votes and commodities. We often talk about organizations or campaigns that “parachute in.” They come into town, often don’t have roots, don’t look like us, don’t speak our language, don’t understand our communities, or understand our complex neighborhood dynamics. Yet they have the audacity to tell us what we should be doing. And to add insult to injury, those folks pack up after the election and go home, not to be seen again until the next election, if at all.

This transactional approach—whereby a community member is seen only as a donor, a vote, or a person whose story you can exploit—is not only deeply offensive, but it’s not sustainable. We can tell when people are trying to exploit our community for every vote and every resource that will advance their own agenda. My organization, Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, does our best to disrupt this model and this kind of thinking.

This rejection of the idea that our people are only as valuable as their vote is especially critical given our location. Our office is located in the most incarcerated zip code, 53206, and a lot of staff members live in this zip code. In Wisconsin, you don't get your voting rights back until you're fully "off paper" (i.e., until you are done with the terms of your supervision and incarceration). If you are cutting corners, and focusing just on trying to extract every vote, you naturally leave people behind. You send a message that if you can't vote then you can't participate at all in democracy or be civically engaged.

By cutting corners and not having deeper conversations, grassroots organizations tend to fall into transactional relationships with their communities. When we cut corners like that, we don't get to know the personality of the neighborhood and the community, and the nuances. But if we organize Black people with the dignity and respect Black people deserve, we wouldn't cut those corners. We wouldn't make assumptions and then try to be white saviors to a community we know nothing about yet expect everything from.

Listen to people and act on what you are hearing

Having constant conversations and taking the time to build relationships allows you to have your own world of focus groups. Instead of paying remote consultants to cherry-pick a universe and then create a whole message campaign without talking to one resident, you have a constant direct line to the most important people, the community. White savior complex happens when you don't take the time to listen. And that failure is very costly: the message you assumed would resonate actually backfired and now you have to start the organizing all over again with a community whose trust you lost—if you ever had it.

Listening to the community is kind of like the golden rule, but it is helpful only if you actually implement what you're hearing and use community feedback to guide your work and strategy. If there is consistent feedback, you can plan, execute, analyze, and then retool if necessary. So many times I have seen people plan without input from the community, execute a plan the way they think it should be executed—and then that's it. In contrast, by nurturing a direct line to the community, you can analyze what you're hearing and be in a position to adapt and retool if necessary. That's how campaigns are won.

I've witnessed situations in which organizations and candidates know something isn't working and then assume they themselves know how to retool without doing that gut check. I've also seen organizations drift in terms of their mission. Instead of being rooted and guided by the community, organizations can find themselves guided by funding restrictions from grants. If you are solidly rooted in community then you won't have to worry about things like "mission drift." Sometimes—if the community won't buy in—that means saying "no" to opportunities. Sometimes it's not a flat "no," but a "not right now, we need to ask our members what they think." In a world that feels like every day is a crisis, it can be easy to make those assumptions, skip that gut check, and fall into those other pitfalls. We need to be intentional about disrupting transactional patterns that lead us away from what our communities want and need.

Remember the human side of organizing

At the end of the day, we organizers have to ask ourselves, “Why do we do this work?” A lot of times it boils down to making people’s lives better. Improving people’s lives and democracy are interconnected. We cannot have a strong and robust democracy if we are leaving out people who can’t vote. Some of our own team members, who educate our community day in and day out, haven’t had their voting rights restored yet. Whatever your voting status, you have a say in democracy. You can still testify or call your representatives. You can still knock on doors and say, “Hey I can’t vote, but you can....”

We can paint a picture of the people we would be leaving out with a limited concept of democracy and civic engagement. It is a 100% losing strategy to keep shrinking our own base. By equating a person’s value with their ability to vote, we are no better than those behind voter suppression efforts. And if we continue to treat every day as an urgent crisis during which we can throw listening and feedback out the door, then we discard people and don’t see them as full people. No matter if you can vote or not, no matter if time seems limited, your issues matter, you still matter. We need to make sure we let people know that.

Engage in year-round organizing

With an expanded definition of civic engagement that embraces people as full members of a democracy, not just as a vote, there’s a lot to tackle. And it always feels like there is not enough time. This is why year-round organizing is so important. Communities of color continue to be the targets of voter suppression efforts and face more and more roadblocks to civic participation. To compensate for these additional challenges, you simply need more time to talk to people. To actually be able to build the meaningful relationships I discussed earlier, you need to take the time to do it. You can’t just engage people a couple of weeks or months before an election and think you’ll get your desired outcome. People are naturally skeptical of strangers, especially those trying to tell them about politics. It takes time to develop those relationships, which is why you need to have a year-round organizing plan and presence. That is what will give you the ability to disrupt the traditional transactional organizing that no longer works.

Dig deeper and ask ‘Why?’ often

At the end of the day, we as organizers need to be grounded and centered in why we do this work. My team often hears me ask “Why?” at least 10 times a week. When you strip away the political agendas, the rhetoric, and the personal vendettas, you get to the core of people’s issues. You see people as full people, with complex feelings, perspectives, and issues. Working in a transactional space doesn’t allow you to see the full humanity in someone. In a transactional space, you see them as a donor, a vote, a person whose story

you can exploit, but not a real person.

It's easy to get into a routine and just go through the motions, but that will never build actual power. When we first started knocking on doors in the bitter Wisconsin cold, people didn't trust us. Our community had been burned by the transactional nature of organizing and politics. Even when we came asking "What does it look like for the Black community to thrive?" we got doors slammed in our faces because people thought we were "just another fly-by-night organization," in the actual words of a resident. We had to prove ourselves and earn the trust of our own community, and rightfully so. We couldn't be mad at our own community's skepticism because we understood it. We knew in order to build something long term and special, we had to take our time and be intentional about building trust.

Mean it when you say you work with directly impacted people

In addition to having deeper, more meaningful conversations, we meet people where they are at—and we hire "directly impacted people." I've grown to hate that term as it is used more and more in a tokenistic way and people rarely actually mean it. Working and amplifying the stories of directly impacted people again means seeing people as full people. Personally impacted people are impacted by the same issues you are organizing around and fighting for—or against. This personal impact means that there are structural challenges in their lives that need to be considered. Sometimes people want directly impacted people to tell their stories, but don't bother to think about the challenges and barriers to those personal testimonies. People want to work with directly impacted people until the barriers become inconvenient to them. When we take the time to understand people's barriers and structural lack of access to democracy, we work with people more, and we become even more invested. Again, we need to stop seeing people as something to exploit for our own gain and agendas.

Conclusion: Always challenge yourself to truly listen

When we strip away the polling, data, and overpaid consultants, we're left with the real truth: our community's lived experience. Research doesn't always capture someone's lived experience. It doesn't ensure that you understand *why* people feel the way they do. Listening to people where they are at, and cutting through the noise, is the only way we can be successful in our organizing. Always challenge yourself at the same time you challenge the status quo. When we listen, truly listen, only then are we able to act in a way that actually changes and improves people's lives.