

Designing Open, Scalable Organizing Structures: Architecture, Leadership Development, and Participation Design

Executive Summary

Understanding what Massive Open Organizing is and why it works (Guide 1) is the foundation. This guide goes deeper into the architecture: the specific structural and process designs that allow organizing to scale while maintaining the relational depth that makes it powerful. How do you design an organizing structure that is genuinely open — welcoming participants at any level of commitment — while also developing the leadership depth that drives real scale? How do you build distributed organizing capacity without losing coherence? How do you develop leaders systematically at a rate that keeps pace with participation growth? And how do you sustain participation over the long campaigns that produce structural change?

These are the questions that separate campaigns that achieve brief peaks of mass participation from those that build enduring organizing capacity. The answers are structural and process-based — they are matters of deliberate design, not of luck, talent, or timing. This guide provides the specific architectural principles, structural templates, and process designs that allow organizations to build organizing capacity that scales.

Evidence Table

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
Organizations that use a structured "ladder of engagement" — explicit pathways from initial to deeper participation — retain significantly more participants and develop more leaders than those without explicit pathways.	High (community organizing research)	Participation pathway design is a primary driver of retention and leadership development.
Small groups (5–15 people) with genuine relationships, shared goals, and real agency are the most durable and effective unit of mass organizing.	High (organizing research; small group psychology)	The small group is the irreducible unit of MOO — all other structures are composed of functioning small groups.
One-on-one organizing conversations — structured personal conversations about values, motivations, and potential for deeper engagement — are the most effective tool for leadership identification and development.	High (community organizing practice and research)	The one-on-one conversation is the most important skill in a MOO practitioner's toolkit.
Campaigns that provide participants with a genuine "public narrative" — a story of self, story of us, and story of now — motivate sustained engagement significantly more effectively than issue-focused communications alone.	High (Ganz public narrative research)	Public narrative is a MOO infrastructure investment, not just a communications technique.

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
Organizing campaigns that integrate celebration and recognition of participant contributions sustain participation through adversity significantly better than those that do not.	Moderate (community organizing practice literature)	Structured recognition and celebration are organizing investments, not optional extras.
Regular, structured "accountability sessions" — where participants report on commitments made and outcomes achieved — dramatically improve follow-through rates compared to unstructured voluntary reporting.	High (behavioral research; community organizing practice)	Accountability structures are the mechanism that converts organizing energy into organized action.

Step-by-Step Framework

Step 1: Design Your Participation Ladder

The participation ladder is the structural backbone of open organizing: a visual model of how participants move from initial interest through active participation to organizing leadership, with clear, specific activities at each level and deliberate transition mechanisms between levels.

The five levels of a typical MOO participation ladder:

Level 1 — Awareness and initial interest: The person knows about the campaign and has expressed some interest (signed up for a newsletter, signed a petition, attended a public event). This is not yet organizing — it is the pipeline for organizing. The goal at this level is to identify people who might be interested in deeper engagement and to make a personal ask.

Level 2 — First action: The person has taken a concrete first action (attended a house meeting, participated in a one-day action, joined a local group's first meeting). At this level, the critical transition mechanism is the personal follow-up: a one-on-one conversation or personal message that identifies what motivated the person, what they are willing to do, and whether they might be interested in taking on more.

Level 3 — Active participant: The person is regularly attending activities, has relationships with other participants, and is taking recurring action. At this level, the organizing work is deepening commitment and identifying potential leaders: who is showing up consistently? Who is bringing others? Who is doing work without being asked?

Level 4 — Local organizer: The person is running their own organizing activities — hosting meetings, recruiting participants, managing a local group. They have genuine agency within the campaign framework. At this level, the organizing work is developing their capacity: coaching their organizing skills, connecting them to other organizers, and providing the support and recognition that sustains their contribution.

Level 5 — Leader/trainer: The person is not just organizing but developing other organizers — training, mentoring, and coaching the level 4 organizers below them. They are the multipliers of the campaign's organizing capacity, and they are the most important output of the leadership development process.

Designing transitions between levels:

- The transition from Level 1 to Level 2 is driven by the personal ask — the single most effective mobilization mechanism.
- The transition from Level 2 to Level 3 is driven by relationship — whether the person develops genuine connections with other participants.
- The transition from Level 3 to Level 4 is driven by leadership identification — someone recognizing and naming the person's leadership potential and making a specific development ask.
- The transition from Level 4 to Level 5 is driven by training and mentorship — deliberate development of organizing skill and the experience of developing others.

Step 2: Master the One-on-One Organizing Conversation

The one-on-one organizing conversation is the most important skill in the MOO toolkit — and the most consistently underinvested. It is a structured personal conversation between an organizer and a potential participant or leader, typically 30–60 minutes, with a specific purpose: to understand the person's values and motivations, to assess their potential for deeper engagement, and to make a specific ask that moves them to the next level on the participation ladder.

The structure of an effective one-on-one:

Opening: Establish a genuine personal connection — this is a conversation between two people, not an interview or a recruitment pitch. Ask about the person's life, their work, their concerns.

Story: The organizer shares their own story — specifically, the story of why they are doing this organizing work, what values and experiences brought them to this cause. This models the kind of sharing the conversation will invite from the other person.

Their story: The organizer invites the other person to share their story — what brought them to this cause or issue, what they care about, what motivates them. Listen carefully: this is where you learn whether and how this person might be developed as a leader.

The world as it is / the world as it could be: The organizer shares a brief, compelling picture of the problem and the potential — not a speech, but an honest account of what is at stake and what is possible.

The ask: A specific, concrete ask that is appropriate to where the person currently is on the participation ladder. Not "would you be interested in getting more involved?" but "would you be willing to host a house meeting for 10 of your friends and neighbors in the next two weeks?" The ask should be specific, time-bounded, and slightly challenging — big enough to require real commitment, small enough to be realistic.

Close: Thank the person, confirm the commitment, establish a specific next contact point.

The organizing maxim: Never leave a conversation without a specific ask and a specific commitment.

Step 3: Build Functioning Small Groups

The small group — typically 5–15 people with genuine relationships, a shared purpose, and real agency — is the irreducible unit of mass organizing. All other organizing structures (local chapters, regional networks, national campaigns) are ultimately composed of functioning small groups. Getting the small group right is the most important structural design challenge in MOO.

What makes a small group function:

Genuine relationships: Members of the group know each other as people — not just as fellow participants in a cause. They have had one-on-one conversations, shared personal experiences, and built the kind of trust that sustains commitment through difficulty.

Shared purpose: The group has a clear, specific shared goal — not a general aspiration ("we care about animal welfare") but a specific, achievable outcome they are working toward together ("we are going to secure a cage-free commitment from [Company X] in this city by [date]").

Real agency: The group makes real decisions — about tactics, about activities, about how to recruit, about how to respond to setbacks. Groups that are given only pre-designed activities to execute lose the sense of agency that sustains participation.

Regular rhythm: The group meets regularly, predictably, and purposefully. Irregular meetings signal low priority and undermine the relational depth that the group depends on.

Accountability: Members make specific commitments in group settings and report on those commitments at the following meeting. This structure is what converts good intentions into organized action.

A facilitator/organizer: Every effective small group has someone playing the organizer role — facilitating meetings, maintaining relationships between sessions, coaching members, and connecting the group to the broader campaign.

Designing for small group formation:

Most participants will not spontaneously form effective small groups — they need structure and support. Design your MOO architecture to facilitate small group formation: provide training for group facilitators, create shared tools and materials, establish regular connection points between local groups and the broader campaign, and invest in the support of local organizers.

Step 4: Build the Public Narrative Infrastructure

Marshall Ganz's public narrative framework — developed from his work with the United Farm Workers and later with the Obama 2008 campaign — is one of the most powerful tools in the MOO toolkit. It provides a structured approach to the story-telling that is the motivational infrastructure of large-scale organizing.

The three elements of public narrative:

Story of Self: Why I am called to this work. The organizer's personal story — specifically, the experiences, values, and choices that brought them to this cause. Story of Self is the foundation of authentic leadership: it demonstrates that the organizer is acting from genuine conviction rather than professional obligation, and it models the kind of personal sharing that builds trust and connection.

Story of Us: Why we are called to this work together. The story of the community that the campaign is building — the shared values, experiences, and commitments that define who "we" are in this struggle. Story of Us builds the collective identity that sustains participation through adversity.

Story of Now: Why we must act now. The story of the challenge and the opportunity that face the community in this moment — the urgency that makes action now more important than delay. Story of Now converts values and identity into specific action: this is why the commitment you are making matters.

Developing public narrative capacity across the organization:

Public narrative is not just a leadership skill — it is an organizing infrastructure. Training all local organizers in public narrative, creating regular opportunities for participants to develop and share their stories, and building Story of Self, Story of Us, and Story of Now into the standard toolkit of MOO facilitators significantly increases the motivational depth of organizing work.

Step 5: Design Accountability Structures

The most common failure in large-scale organizing is not mobilization failure — it is execution failure: the gap between commitments made in organizing meetings and actions taken between meetings. Accountability structures are the organizing mechanisms that close this gap.

Commitment and accountability in small groups:

At every small group meeting, participants make specific commitments for the period before the next meeting: "I will make 10 phone calls to potential supporters this week," "I will recruit two new people to attend our next meeting," "I will send the letter we drafted to the company by Thursday." At the following meeting, the first agenda item is reporting on these commitments: what did you commit to, what did you do, and what did you learn?

This is not punitive — it is supportive. The accountability structure creates a social expectation that sustains follow-through, and it surfaces the real barriers to action so that the group can

problem-solve together.

Organizing chain accountability:

In distributed organizing structures, accountability flows up and down the organizing chain: local organizers are accountable to their campaign coordinators, who are accountable to campaign leadership. Regular check-in calls between levels of the organizing structure (typically weekly or bi-weekly) are the mechanism for this accountability — and they serve a dual function: tracking progress and providing coaching and support.

Metrics and public progress tracking:

Making campaign progress publicly visible — through regular updates to the full organizing base on how the campaign is advancing toward its goals — builds momentum and sustains motivation. Public progress tracking serves an accountability function too: it makes the collective effort visible and creates shared investment in its success.

Step 6: Sustain Long Campaigns Through Celebration and Renewal

Long campaigns — and the campaigns that produce structural change are almost always long — require deliberate investment in the morale, motivation, and renewal of participants and leaders. This is consistently the most neglected element of MOO architecture, and it is one of the most important.

Celebration: Recognize wins — at every scale. Local wins (a new employer commitment, a successful recruitment drive, a well-attended event) matter as much to the organizers who achieved them as national wins matter to campaign leadership. Build regular recognition practices into the organizing structure: at local group meetings, in campaign-wide communications, and at periodic gatherings of the organizing base.

Renewal gatherings: Periodic gatherings of the broader organizing base — bringing together local organizers from across the campaign geography — serve multiple functions: they build the relationships between local organizers that sustain the broader network; they refresh the shared narrative and recommit participants to the shared purpose; and they provide training and skill development that deepens organizing capacity. Annual or semi-annual national/regional gatherings are standard in mature MOO campaigns.

Leadership succession: Long campaigns will experience leadership turnover — burnout, life transitions, competing demands. Build explicit leadership succession planning into the organizing structure: identify successors for key roles before they become vacant, invest in developing multiple leaders for every critical function, and create graceful transitions that honor departing leaders while sustaining organizational momentum.

Managing burnout: Organizing is demanding work, and organizer burnout is a significant risk in long campaigns. Build in explicit attention to organizer wellbeing: regular check-ins about workload and capacity, clear norms around sustainable commitment levels, and a culture that names and responds to burnout rather than treating it as a personal failure.

Tools and Templates

Participation Ladder Template: A visual tool showing five participation levels with specific activities, transition mechanisms, and development responsibilities at each level.

Customizable for different campaign contexts.

One-on-One Conversation Guide: A structured conversation framework: opening → organizer story → their story → world as it is/could be → specific ask → close. With coaching notes for each phase.

Small Group Meeting Agenda Template: A standard 90-minute small group meeting structure: check-in (personal sharing, 15 min) → commitment review (report-back from last meeting, 20 min) → main work (campaign update, action planning, skill building, 40 min) → next commitments (specific asks and agreements, 10 min) → close (appreciation, 5 min).

Public Narrative Workshop: A 3-hour facilitation process for developing organizer Story of Self, Story of Us, and Story of Now. With coaching pairs exercise and small group sharing structure.

Organizing Chain Accountability Tracker: A weekly check-in template for organizer-coordinator conversations: What did you commit to last week? What did you do? What barriers did you encounter? What support do you need? What are you committing to this week?

Case Vignettes

Case Vignette 1: Participation Ladder in Action — The Humane League's Fast Action Network

The Humane League's Fast Action Network (FAN) is a large-scale digital organizing structure built explicitly around a participation ladder. The FAN begins with low-barrier entry actions (email a company, share a post) and provides explicit pathways for participants who want to do more: joining a local group, taking on a local organizer role, participating in training to develop campaign skills.

The FAN's explicit pathway design — making it clear at each level what the next step is and how to take it — has produced leadership depth that many comparable digital organizing programs lack. The program's emphasis on developing local organizers (not just maintaining a large participant database) has enabled a level of campaign coordination across geographies that centralized campaigning could not replicate.

Key lessons: (1) Explicit pathway design, communicated clearly to participants, dramatically increases the proportion who move to deeper engagement. (2) The combination of digital entry points and relational development mechanisms (local groups, organizer training) produces the depth that digital-only programs cannot achieve. (3) Leadership development investment — not participant recruitment — is the primary driver of long-term organizing capacity.

Case Vignette 2: Public Narrative in a Campaign Launch — Building the Story of Now

A regional animal advocacy coalition launching a new corporate campaign needed to build momentum quickly — to move from a small core team to a distributed network of local organizers in a short time frame. The campaign director, trained in Ganz's public narrative framework, designed the campaign launch around public narrative development rather than tactical planning.

The launch gathering — a one-day convening of 80 potential local organizers — was structured around three exercises: each participant developed and shared their Story of Self (why am I here? what values and experiences brought me to this moment?); the group collectively developed a Story of Us (who are we as a community? what shared values and commitments define us?); and the campaign director presented the Story of Now (why this campaign, why this company, why now?).

The tactical planning session that followed was qualitatively different from what a tactics-first approach would have produced: participants were emotionally invested in the campaign's purpose, not just intellectually aligned with its strategy. Commitment levels were higher, and follow-through in the weeks following the launch was significantly better than in previous campaign launches.

Key lessons: (1) Public narrative is not a communications add-on — it is a motivational infrastructure investment that pays dividends throughout the campaign. (2) Collective Story of Us development (not just listening to a Story of Us from a leader) produces deeper ownership of the campaign's identity. (3) Narrative before tactics produces better tactics — participants who are invested in the purpose bring more energy and creativity to tactical design.

Metrics and KPIs

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Participation ladder distribution	Health of organizing pipeline at each level	Database segmentation by engagement level
Level transition rates (monthly)	Pipeline conversion effectiveness	Database cohort tracking
One-on-one conversations conducted (weekly)	Relational organizing activity	Organizer tracking
Small group meeting frequency and attendance	Distributed structure health	Hub/chapter reporting
Leadership development throughput (quarterly)	Pipeline investment return	Training program tracking
Commitment follow-through rate	Accountability structure effectiveness	Organizer check-in tracking

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Public narrative training completion	Narrative infrastructure investment	Training records

Risks and Mitigations

Risk: Participation ladder becoming a bureaucratic classification system rather than a development tool.

Mitigation: Treat the ladder as a development guide, not a HR record. The purpose is to identify who needs what support to move to the next level — not to sort participants into categories.

Risk: One-on-one conversation practice not being sustained past initial training.

Mitigation: Build one-on-one conversation reporting into organizer accountability structures. Track one-on-ones conducted weekly and make them a standing agenda item in organizer check-ins.

Risk: Small groups becoming social clubs rather than organizing units.

Mitigation: Maintain the commitment-and-accountability structure at every meeting. A small group that does not produce action is not an organizing group — it is a support group.

Risk: Public narrative development time feeling like a luxury during intense campaign phases.

Mitigation: Protect public narrative investment even under campaign pressure. The motivational infrastructure that public narrative builds is what sustains campaign intensity over time.

Implementation Checklist

- ☐ Participation ladder designed with specific activities and transition mechanisms at each level
- ☐ One-on-one conversation guide developed and training delivered to organizers
- ☐ Small group meeting agenda template established and distributed
- ☐ Local group formation support package developed (facilitator training, meeting materials, accountability tools)
- ☐ Public narrative workshop developed and delivered to core organizer team
- ☐ Accountability structures established at small group and organizing chain levels
- ☐ Celebration and recognition practices built into campaign rhythm
- ☐ Renewal gathering planned for organizing base (annual or semi-annual)
- ☐ Leadership succession plan developed for key roles

Glossary

Accountability Structure: An organizing mechanism that converts commitments made in group settings into follow-through actions, through regular reporting and peer accountability.

One-on-One Organizing Conversation: A structured personal conversation between an organizer and a potential participant or leader, designed to understand motivations, assess leadership potential, and make a specific development ask.

Participation Ladder: A visual model of participant pathways from initial engagement through active participation to organizing leadership, with specific activities and transition mechanisms at each level.

Public Narrative: Marshall Ganz's framework for leadership story-telling: Story of Self (why I am called), Story of Us (why we are called together), Story of Now (why we must act now).

Small Group: The irreducible unit of mass organizing: 5–15 people with genuine relationships, a shared specific goal, and real agency within the campaign framework.

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