
How to Organize Your Friends and Family on Thanksgiving

BY

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Nobody wants to share a Thanksgiving table with a sanctimonious leftist jerk. If you're going to talk politics over turkey, do it the right way. Here's how.

With the presidential primaries in full swing, this Thanksgiving holiday requires radicals to be organizers. It's understandable that many dread political conversations around the turkey — nobody wants to be harangued during the holiday meal. But serious organizers don't harangue, and if you follow my tips here, you should be able to win more street canvassers, phone bankers, or donations for your preferred candidate (or at least neutralize the effect of relatives who might remain confused about who and what is to blame for the economic and social malaise gripping the nation).

The concept of acting like an organizer, not merely an activist, is key. Organizers devote their time to engaging with people who are not yet in our movement, who don't identify with "us," who are disengaged from "our" movement — the vast "undecideds," those who aren't reading this magazine, or any of our social media feeds (*yet*). Activists are already in agreement about what's wrong and who is to blame, and their focus is on getting other activists to take action. The first step to organizing is your approach and your attitude: you must shift from wanting to be right, to be heard, or to win the intellectual argument while everyone walks away from the table and retires to either play football, fall asleep from tryptophan overload, recline on the couch — or shop.

Organizing and being an organizer starts by behaving like one, by committing to a set of principles and methods, and trying them over and over. You talk less, you ask more. You plan the conversation strategy ahead of time and predefine success. For example, you persuade family members who might be

wedded to a particular candidate in the election to change their mind instead of nailing the seven hundred thousand reasons Trump should be impeached. (That's one reason for every federal worker he made come to work for no pay for a month at the start of 2019.)

I first learned the science and art of successful conversations from my mentors in the community organizing world. But I got way sharper at the process when I entered the union movement full time. That's because the workplace in damned near every single union campaign is hijacked by professional union busters who know how to polarize the workplace. The link between a good, hard union-organizing conversation and this Thanksgiving holiday rests on not getting sucked into the trap of Fox News or MSNBC talking points at all. Union organizers focus on two things in a difficult conversation: the semantics we use (literally the word choices) and the structure of the conversation, meaning the progression of steps. They actually matter. What we call an SOC (a structured organizing conversation) assumes you've practiced shifting your word choices from *exclusive* ones to *inclusive*, and to those that attach the active participation of the person you are engaging to the solution they want on issues that matter to them.

For example, your twenty-one-year-old niece, Sally, comes to the holiday weekend thinking Amy Klobuchar sounds tough or Cory Booker did a great job at the last debate. Start by hearing her, not debating her. You will have way more success by being quiet than by being loud.

Step #1: Showtime! Introduction, Purpose, Context for the Conversation

Be excited to see Sally! And mean it. Organizers call this "showtime." Ask how she's doing; catch up for a few minutes; make sure you remember what she's up to with her life today. And be clear you'd love to check in about her ideas and what she's thinking about the upcoming election.

Step #2: Get Her Issues

Good questions to ask to understand what matters most to a coworker or niece aren't different, though how you frame them might be. In a union campaign, we simply ask, "If you could change three things at work tomorrow, what would they be?" Note: we do *not* ask, "How're things in your department?" which is way less specific and might drag you into long conversations about the jerk who leaves a mess in the bathroom and the boor who is always telling sexist jokes. We ask specific questions that get to the point: their working conditions.

As that relates to Niece Sally, a good way to get at what matters to her is a variation of: "If you had a magic wand and could change three things about life in America [or her town or city or school], what would you change?"

The rest of your conversation needs to be anchored to her answers to that question. That's why getting issues is the second step in any hard conversation. You can't skip this step, you can't gloss it over, you can't come back to it later, and you *definitely* can't decide for Sally what her issues are — meaning, don't impose your issues or the issues you hear other twenty-one-year-olds talk about onto her. She's her own person.

If she goes vague or rogue, or snarky, like, "I'd like a million dollars in my bank account," you can keep gently pressing with friendly, probing follow-ups like, "Me too! That one's a little tricky. But on the way to getting a million bucks, what other three things do you want to see changed?"

You have to resist all the fun stuff you could say right here: the urge to be sarcastic in response is your activist impulse, not your organizer self. Sure, of course, you could have a field day with that, like, "Me too! Let's rob a bank!" or "Let's ask Jeff Bezos to donate a fraction of one hour of one day to do that for you because his income grows by \$13 million per hour!" Do *not* say any of that. Keep probing.

Once you get Sally to say what's on her mind — climate disaster, lack of funds for college or car payments or rent, or getting out of her parents' house, for example — you can start to do the second part of this step: agitating.

If she has moved back in with her parents, you can ask, "Why do you think your parents' generation didn't struggle like you do to find affordable housing?" or "Who is making the decisions that drive up your rent so much? Why do you think they do that?" You want to get Sally thinking about who is to blame for her being at home and about what the real solutions are for so many young people being unable to afford living on their own. You know you're getting somewhere when she starts saying stuff out loud such as, "Airbnb has removed a ton of affordable apartments that my friends and I used to live in," or "My paycheck is pathetic and the boss has a ton of money," or "The student loan interest kicked in already, while I am still finishing school. What's up with that?"

When a worker, or your niece, starts to wonder about who is causing the problem and what do about it, move on to the next step.

Step #3: Vision, the Plan to Win, Urgency

Segue into a plan to win by restating her issue or issues several times — no kidding, a bunch — so she knows you are actually listening to her, not just waxing on about Marxism, which she fully expects from you. “So, Sally, I hear you. Rents are out of control, wages stink, and the planet is burning.” (Only if she stated these issues — you should reference only what she said.) Here’s an example script:

In order for you to afford your own place and breathe clean air, the 2020 election has to be different from any election in your lifetime or mine — things need to really change a lot. And key to making the change needed so you can afford your own place is that you and I and a whole lot of people need to build the kind of organization that can force the changes we need on election day. But, more important, the day after the election!

The thing that people did wrong back when you were a kid and we elected Obama was that everyone went home and trusted him to make the changes he promised. But to really make it so that you and everyone you know can afford to move out of your parents’ houses is going to mean creating a network of people ready to get a presidential candidate who will build a broader movement to force the changes the Wall Street-backed elite want to keep in place. The problem in the past is that our side works for the election and then goes home. But to make real change so you can afford a place on your own means all of us have to act differently.

Notice that I’ve restated her issue three times in a handful of sentences. You have to tie everything you say from here on out to the most important issue or issues the person you are talking to mentioned during step number two. Don’t worry, you can’t overdo it.

In a union campaign, you’d now start walking through a very specific plan to win: “So, Sally, the first step to winning a raise big enough to afford your rent is you and your coworkers building a committee of the most respected worker leaders in each area, on each shift, because it’s those workers who can help everyone stay focused when the bosses start trying to scare everyone.”

In this case you say, “So, Sally, the first step is evaluating which candidates have said they understand that making the kind of changes that will allow you to afford rent on your own is going to require building a mass movement that continues the day after the November 2020 election.”

Again, note that I did not say which candidate or candidates have said this — nor should you. You are teaching your niece to think. Telling people what they should think does *not* work. Creating thinking people who come to understand that a functioning democracy requires their own actions *can* work.

Ask Sally, “I know it’s hard as hell to keep up with what promises each of the candidates have made, but have you heard any of them discussing what it’s going to take so you can win the changes needed to move out of your parents’ house?” Connect strong facts about candidate statements with her need to get out of her parents’ house.

The more specific you make the plan to win, connected to her issue, the stronger you are heading into the crucial next step: the ask.

Step #4: Call the Question, Frame the Choice

You have to make your “ask” clear. Frame the choice for her based on her issues.

So, Sally, I would have hated having to move back in with my folks, even though I love them. But things do change in this country [or city, state, town, workplace] when you and I take action to make them change. Otherwise, big corporations will keep making profit-driven decisions that raise rents and keep wages low. Did you hear about the huge win in New York State, where, when people just like you decided to change the powers that be in the State Senate to protect and expand rent control and rent regulations so that people just like you can afford your own place, they won?

Thousands of progressives and young people like you decided enough was enough in New York, and they won. So we know it can work, even against stiff odds. Are you ready to be able to afford a place of your own by working to help elect [definitely not Klobuchar or Booker, but fill in your choice here]?

Now stop talking. Really. Stop talking. (If nosy relatives try to intercede, move away from them.) In a union-organizing conversation, we call this the long, uncomfortable silence. You are seriously asking someone to do something different from what they had planned, or to do something they never contemplated. So give them time to think about it. Whatever you do, don’t start talking right away because you can’t bear the silence.

If she asks more questions, great. Answer her, and don’t start going off half nuts about why candidate so-and-so is the only choice. You will lose her. *Do* answer her questions and return to the issue. If she’s waffling, frame the choice that matters, carefully and respectfully: “Look, you and everyone you know faces a choice. You can keep living at home, or you can make the decision to do something about it that’s going to stand a real chance of changing everything about your future by signing up to work with me on XYZ campaign. You can make a decision to either never have enough to move out or fight for change so you can move out.”

Once she commits, you move on to step number five.

Step #5: Inoculation

In a union campaign, we never leave a conversation without moving from the worker's commitment to preparing them for the boss's coming attack once they know that worker is pro-union. In a union campaign, we'd be asking something like, "So, Sally, when your manager sees your name on that petition that demands the right to unionize, free from intimidation, what do you think they're going to say or do about it?"

At Thanksgiving, it's a variation: "So, Sally, what do you think Uncle Tom is going to say after he has a few drinks later tonight and you mention that you are volunteering to work for XYZ?"

Basically, you prepare people for the opposition *before* the opposition's actions hit, and you normalize the fact that any time you are about to fight for real control over your own life, the power structure is going to fight back.

Step #6: Next Steps, Follow-Up Plan

In a union campaign, you'd now be engaging immediately in what we call "list work," which means you'd show Sally a list of all the workers in her work area and ask her to go through each name and tell you everything she knows about them. You'd then make a plan, based on who she knows, for her to take some specific next step in the campaign, such as getting a worker she has a relationship with to come to a meeting with you, or getting two workers she knows to sign the petition, or any number of things that are very specific and for which you make a follow-up plan.

At Thanksgiving, you want to do the same, but because Sally won't have her boss cancel her vacation based on her agreeing, you can probably, at that point, say, "What day and time are you leaving to go back to [wherever she lives when not at the Thanksgiving table]?" If this is a one-meal affair, you have to make

a plan with her right then and there. It could be as simple as “Sally, I am so psyched about your decision to fight to make rent affordable and wages better! What’s a good time between now and Sunday when we can actually talk more about your involvement?”

And don’t leave the conversation without a plan. Don’t. Do not!

You can adapt this basic six-step conversation to a small group at dinner, over drinks, outside while playing ball. . whatever your tradition is. If I were with a group of my nieces and nephews, I’d turn this into a go-round, away from their parents (depending, you know, on their parents). Basically, the six-step SOC is crucial to successful organizing. And it requires that you shut your piehole — a lot. You simply can’t be an effective organizer if you can’t listen, and, hear, and engage people where they are at when you begin.

Don’t be tricked into not discussing politics at the holiday gathering — but do it well, with a plan. Most people *do* want to engage on these issues, but not in a screaming match. And no one likes to be smarmily told anything. Rather, the structure of a basic organizing conversation is one where people are asked to think for themselves, where they do most of the talking, and where you help them puzzle through contradictions. And a conversation in which you can help them connect their self-interest to a broader, collective interest, and that allows you to get good at framing the choice to help them overcome their well-earned cynicism, will serve you — and the working class — well this Thanksgiving and beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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