

The 13 Organizing rules of Saul Alinsky



Organizing is a political tradition that brings together people without institutional power, helping them unite, build strength, and achieve change they could never accomplish alone. Over the past decades, more and more has been written about this practice. One name that appears again and again is **Saul Alinsky**, who articulated several influential principles of organizing. *Rules for Radicals* (1971) reflects both Alinsky's decades of organizing experience and his personal vision for how the political left, after the revolutionary 1960s, could create lasting, concrete change. [It can be found here.](#)

Times have changed, and we must adapt both our politics and our ways of organizing. Over the years, many compelling critiques of Alinsky's approach have emerged, and other organizing traditions have taken root. A historical overview of anti-racist and feminist critiques, among others, can be found in the introduction to Rinku Sen's useful organizing handbook [Stir It Up](#).

We still find Alinsky's rules provocative and insightful enough to offer them to every organizer. Alinsky insisted he was opposed to dogmatism and favored pragmatic politics. So take what works for you, leave what feels outdated, or adapt it to your context. Below you'll find the 13 rules from his book, briefly summarized.

1

Power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have.



Power comes from two main sources: money and people. Marginalized communities must build their power from their own flesh and blood.

2

Never go outside the expertise of your people.



Doing so creates confusion, fear, and withdrawal. Feeling confident strengthens everyone's backbone.

3

Whenever possible, go outside the expertise of the enemy.



Look for ways to heighten their sense of insecurity, fear, and uncertainty.

4

Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.



If their policy says everyone gets a response, send 30,000 letters. You can overwhelm them this way, no one can live up to all their own rules.



- 5 **Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.** ➡ You can't defend yourself against it. It's irrational, it stings, and it works as a powerful tool to pressure your opponent into making concessions.
- 6 **A good tactic is one your people enjoy.** ➡ They'll keep doing it without needing encouragement, and they'll come back for more. They'll take initiative and start suggesting even better tactics themselves.
- 7 **A tactic that goes on for too long becomes a drag.** ➡ Don't let your actions turn into old news.
- 8 **Keep the pressure on. Never give up.** ➡ Keep trying new things that throw your opponent off balance. If they've figured out how to defend themselves against one tactic, hit another flank with something fresh.
- 9 **The threat is usually more terrifying than the action itself.** ➡ Your opponent's imagination and ego can conjure far worse consequences than activists could ever produce.
- 10 **The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.** ➡ It's this steady grind that forces reactions, reactions that are crucial to your campaign's success.
- 11 **If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its countervailing [positive].** ➡ Repression or violence from the other side can win the public over. People tend to sympathize with the underdog.
- 12 **The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.** ➡ Never let your opponent score points by exposing you lack a solution to the problem.
- 13 **Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.** ➡ Strip away its support network and isolate it from sympathy. Go after people, not institutions, people feel pressure far more intensely than systems do.



We are Stroomversnellers

Stroomversnellers is a trainers' collective of experienced campaigners, organizers, facilitators, and trainers. We have all been active in environmental organizations, grassroots initiatives, labor unions, or anti-racism movements. Through trial and error, we've learned how to run effective campaigns, build organizations, and create social change.

We are constantly learning and love sharing our knowledge and experiences with others. The world doesn't move in the right direction on its own—far from it. Only with many well-prepared people can a different, more just society come closer. That's why we support a wide range of groups fighting for social and ecological justice, offering advice, strategy and brainstorming sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we grow, strengthen our impact, and work toward a better world!

Toolbox for Movements

This guide is part of the "Toolbox for Movements." The toolbox includes a collection of short digital guides covering the basics of strategy, movement building, activism, and organizing. It provides a solid foundation for beginning activists, while also offering fresh insights for experienced changemakers. [Here](#) you will find links to all other guides published so far.

We love learning too

If you have ideas for improving this guide or adding your own experiences, we'd love to hear from you!

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