

Activating people

**How do you activate people to take a
role or task in your organisation and
stay?**

Introduction

Campaigning and social change is people's work. That's why we're always looking for new people to join us. And luckily, many people want to contribute and volunteer for a good cause. The two main motives for this are: wanting to make a difference and finding like-minded people. Still, finding people, getting them active, and keeping them active is often a challenge.

Stroomversnellers often sees two problems within organizations that make this difficult. When we ask people to get involved in our organization, we often don't ask the question clearly enough, and we don't have the conditions in place to keep them sustainably engaged. It helps to think systematically about each step in the process: from first interest, to becoming active, and the steps that follow, to where someone finds their place in the organization. Below is a systematic approach to doing this.

Step 1: Finding people

You want to create a pond to fish out the right people. And for many reasons, you also want to know who is willing to commit to the change you want to bring about. That means, first of all, that you need a compelling story about your plan to win. How will you create change, and what will be better as a result? Next, you want to make sure you can easily reach those people with the steps you want to take. This is what we call list building. You want to systematically collect contact details of people who agree with you and who want to help, so you can ask an ever-growing group of people for support. Without contact details, you can't ask people for anything.

And you can ask for contact details in many ways. For example, in a conversation, by inviting people at all your meetings and actions to sign up for your newsletter, or by asking for an email address when they sign an online petition. For more details, see our [guide on personal data for people power](#).



Step 2: Ask the right person to become active on a level that suits them

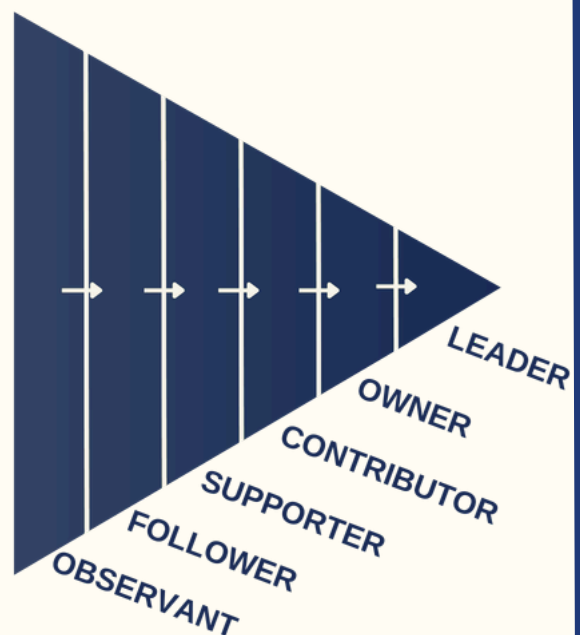
There are many people who want to help. But not everyone wants to do so in the same way. Sometimes because of lack of time, sometimes because they want to get to know your organization better first, and sometimes because they still need to learn how they can contribute. Many people will need to become more active step by step. And it helps to offer those steps systematically: from an entry level that requires little time and carries little risk, to ultimately sharing responsibility for the running of your organization. We call this a journey of engagement.

It starts with people who only know your organization from the media: observers. A follower is someone who, for example, subscribes to your newsletter or follows your organization on social media. A supporter is a member or donor. A contributor attends your meetings and actions. An owner also takes on a role there. And a leader assumes responsibilities and coordination. For each level of engagement, you want to offer something. And within each step of this journey of engagement, you want to invite people to do more and move up a level. Some people will say yes to that, but not everyone. There will always be more observers than owners and leaders.

If you apply this systematically within every campaign, then in every communication or activity you offer people a step to get involved. That also means you always have the next step in your campaign ready.

Because the longer people have to wait for a next step that suits them, the more of them will drop out again.

A journey of engagement has another advantage: as an organization, you get the chance to get to know people better, introduce and train them step by step, and, especially when it comes to owners and leaders, make a very deliberate choice about which role you offer to whom.



From: [Guide Ladders of Engagement](#)



Finally, it also gives you the chance to involve people who, for very legitimate reasons (such as being too busy with work and family, or not having the privilege to take many risks), cannot contribute much in other ways. These are people who may still want to donate, sign a petition, or do something else that can be small.

Step 3: Ask a tough and 'precise' question

Ask a tough question. A question that can only be answered with yes or no. And accept that a no is just as valuable as a yes, and much better than an insincere yes or a maybe. That means you need to be able to make a good assessment of where someone is at. How much time does someone have? How much risk are they willing to take? What qualities do they bring?

The question “Do you want to become active in my organization?” asks for a general and endless commitment and can be interpreted in dozens of ways. The question “Would you be willing to spend 5 hours a week on social media work, and be at the meeting on Wednesday evening?” can only be answered with yes or no.

Step 4: Organise an introduction and onboarding

Whether it's a newsletter subscriber or someone who is going to coordinate a working group, give people the time to get familiar with your organization at that level and with what is expected of them. Ask them what they want to do, what motivates them, and what they are good at. Teach them the skills they need to participate and fulfill their role. Help them navigate your organization and understand how it works. Pay attention to the culture within the organization, and when you give someone a task, provide clear boundaries and make it clear what results you expect from them. The more you expect from someone, the more attention and time you need to invest in a solid onboarding process.



Step 5: How to keep people

Connection: make sure people regularly attend enjoyable and effective gatherings where there's space for interaction.

Impact: people want to make a difference, so affirm that and show them what they can contribute.

Welcome newcomers: for example, by explicitly mentioning them at larger gatherings. A growing group creates a sense of success that keeps people engaged.

Give people a role and place in the organization: people want to matter in the group and develop their own talents. In a group where the same people always do everything, others feel excluded.

Group processes: pay sufficient attention to how people interact and work together.

Discuss what team members expect from each other and from the team in terms of time, commitment, and effort.

Do more, meet less: meetings are meant to prepare and align the work. Keep a healthy balance.

Take the time people invest seriously: you're asking for time from people who are already busy. Use it sparingly and don't keep them waiting.

Take impact and responsibility seriously: ask people to be accountable for what they do and deliver.

Assign tasks to buddies: ideally in pairs, where each person brings something different. Make space for celebrations and shared meals.

Provide training: and other forms of learning.

Ask for the revolution: people get excited about large, impactful change. But that also means you'll need to ask for significant contributions and risk-taking. Everyone understands that spending just one minute on signing a petition won't create massive impact.

Preparation: prepare people for the risks, setbacks, and opposition they will face when trying to change the world. Explain what could happen and how they can keep going regardless.



Step 6: Saying goodbye

Yes, that's part of it as well, because nothing lasts forever. Give people the chance to step away at a moment that works for you. There's no benefit in people who say they're still motivated but in reality no longer want to participate and gradually disengage. That also impacts the rest of the team. Regularly ask people whether they still have the ability and motivation to carry out their role. And give them the opportunity to say no. This also gives you the chance to learn from those who leave. What was the reason? Could the organization have done something to prevent it? And it gives you the opportunity to find a replacement in time and organize a proper transfer of knowledge and experience.

Also dare to part ways with people who are not functioning well or who, as disruptive elements, cause more trouble than they contribute. You want to achieve a goal with your organization, you're not a social club. Moreover, letting a disruptive person stay can mean that others leave your organization because they don't want to work in a team where they are constantly bothered by this person. That is demotivating. Parting ways in this manner is never easy, and it requires tact. Even a disruptive person is still someone who wants to contribute. You can rely on clear boundaries, codes of conduct, and work agreements.



We are Stroomversnellers

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

We're always learning and we love to share our knowledge and experience with others.

Because the world doesn't move in the right direction on its own, in fact, quite the opposite. A better society can only be built by many well-prepared people working together. That's why we support groups fighting for social and ecological justice with advice, strategy or brainstorm sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we can grow, build power, and change the world.

Toolbox for Movements

This guide is part of our [Toolbox for Movements](#), a growing collection of short digital guides with essential knowledge on strategy, movement building, direct action, and organizing. A solid foundation for new activists, and a fresh perspective for experienced changemakers. You'll find all our published guides there as well.

We love learning too

So if you have ideas for improving this guide, or want to add your own experiences, let us know!

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