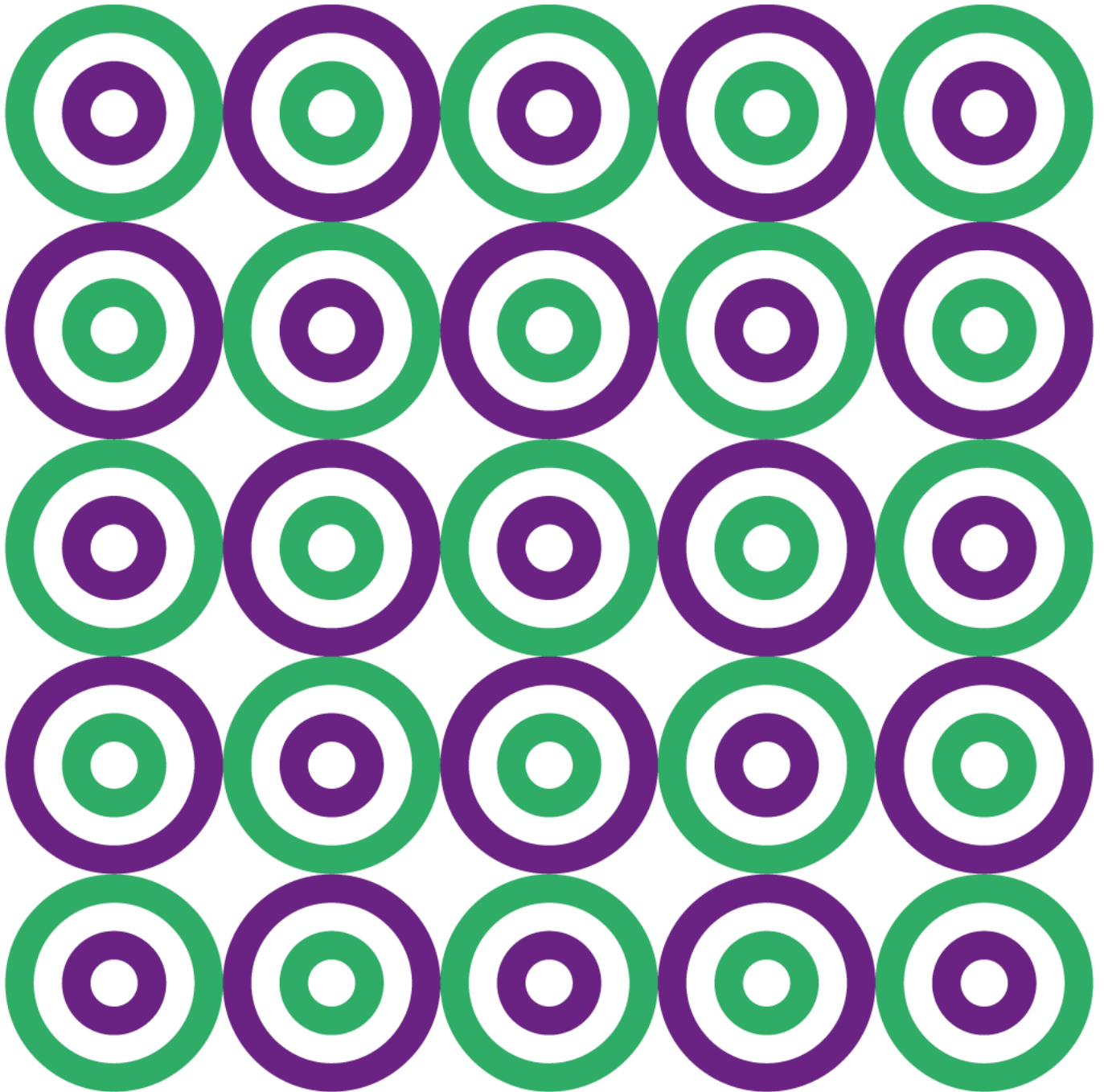


Organising to Win

Identifying natural workplace leaders and getting them active in UNISON



UNISON's Organising to Win strategy identifies the urgent need to increase our activist base. But how? It's not easy. Feedback from branches and organisers often reinforces the view that members are just not interested. The traditional "your union needs you!" message has not been identifying enough new activists to replace those who are leaving public service jobs or retiring.

But recent years have seen a change, with a significant increase in members taking on activist roles. Part of the reason is the "leader identification" approach taken in successful "Pay Fair for Patient Care" campaigns.

What are "natural leaders"?

Every workplace has its "natural leaders". They are highly respected by their colleagues and often by management too. They are often very good at their job and known by everyone. They are the people colleagues go to for support or advice. They may not be loud or outspoken but they are influential in the workplace. When they do speak, others listen. Unfortunately, they are not necessarily union members, and if they are they may not yet be active.

Compare this to "self-appointed activists". They are the current lifeblood of the union. When the union called for members to be more active, they responded. Principled trade unionists who give their time. Often outspoken and well connected with those who share their views. But their numbers are dwindling. Fewer members are answering the call to take on a union role, and when they do, they are often unable to lead large numbers of colleagues to participate in UNISON activity.

"Natural leaders" and "Self-appointed activists". Which do we need to build and maintain a strong and representative union?

The simple answer is both! We must continue to promote opportunities for members to be nominated to union activity and roles. But promoting opportunities will only reach a relatively small base of "self-appointed activists". To re-build our activist base and successfully organise members in the workplace, we must also identify the natural leaders and bring them into an active role in UNISON.

The leader identification approach is particularly important during strategic organising campaigns. It is these natural leaders who can build majority support for escalating union campaigns and activity in their workplace. But the approach also works for day-to-day base organising, and it can be used in any workplace.

How do we identify the natural leaders?

Union organisers and activists will naturally gravitate towards the self-appointed activists. They are the self-confident and supportive member who is willing to say what they believe others are thinking and quick to criticise the employer and management when needed. We can encourage them to become active, but we must not assume they have the support and respect of their colleagues.

The natural leaders can be identified through a series of one to one or small group conversations. Both require a visit to the workplace – real or virtual – but a visit is essential.

The approach starts with being honest with members that a lack of activism weakens their workplace union. They would be stronger, and more able to tackle the workplace issues that matter to them, with a trusted and respected UNISON contact or steward in their workplace. If you are in a live campaign, around a specific collective issue, you can really emphasise the importance and urgency of getting involved.

- “the only way to build a stronger union and win this is if everyone stands together. Every other department has identified the colleague who will be best at bringing everyone together so we can win....”

Having established need and urgency, ask leadership identification questions such as:

- If you had to go to a colleague for informal support or advice, who would you go to?
- When you have a new starter in the team, is there anyone who buddies or supports them?
- Who does the birthday card collections or organises the night out?
- Have you ever got together to raise an issue with management? Who took the lead?

Ask suitable follow up questions to find out more e.g. “ahh that’s interesting, why does ... take the lead?”. As you speak with more workers you should start hearing the same name or names coming up.

Or if you find yourself in a big enough group of workers, you can ask more directly for them to nominate someone. Visit staff rooms during lunch times or departments during shift change. Choose any time you know groups of staff will be gathered, introduce yourself and say you need a few minutes for a very important conversation:

- The only way to win this is if everyone stands together. Every other department has identified the colleague who will be best at bringing everyone together so we can win.... who in this department would be best at getting the most colleagues to support a campaign? Let's nominate someone now so we can get the ball rolling.

How do we bring the natural leader into union activity?

If you've asked lots of follow up questions, you'll know what makes this person a natural leader and have a sense of what motivates and interests them. This is important because approaching the identified natural leader is the most important of all the one-to-one conversations.

You will need to reiterate why we need to urgently identify a UNISON contact or steward in the workplace and then explain that colleagues have put their faith and trust in them to represent them or help move a particular issue or campaign forward to success e.g.

- Your colleagues really want a stronger workplace union / this campaign to win. They respect you enormously, so they told me that, out of everyone, they have faith in you to take the lead on this campaign, because you're the one who can bring everyone in the department together so you can win

Leader identification by colleagues gives those leaders two strong motivations to get involved. It shows them how valued they are, which both flatters them and recognises their importance to their colleagues. And it gives them a sense of responsibility, that their colleagues are counting on them. These feelings are positively associated with UNISON, giving them the perfect start on their activism pathway. If ever these nominated leaders start becoming disengaged, they can be reminded of these two things to help re-activate those motivations to be involved.

How do we develop new natural leaders into long-term formal union activists?

The UNISON branch guide to developing and supporting activists sets out the steps on the UNISON "trained and active" plan. These cover small initial tasks which set a new activist up to succeed and the importance of buddying, mentoring and formal training.

The guide can be found here <https://learning.unison.org.uk/2019/01/22/3-steps-becoming-trained-and-active/>

Summary

There's a role for anyone and everyone who wants to be involved in UNISON. But to win campaigns we need to find the “natural leaders” and bring them into union activism.

We identify the “natural leaders” through one-to-one and small group conversations with members in the workplace, to identify who they trust and respect.

We then recruit them into UNISON activism on the basis that they have been nominated by their colleagues.

New activists should be set up to succeed, initially with small tasks, at the beginning of a UNISON “trained and active” plan.

Organising to Win resources

Ultimately all organising is a set of tools and techniques deployed to shift the balance of power in favour of our members. How those tools are deployed will vary in different circumstances but generally the fundamentals remain the same. Our Organising to Win webinars and resource library provide a growing set of organising guides including:

- Organising conversations
- Workplace mapping and charting
- The organising and equality impact assessment template and guide
- The five phase plan to win template and guide (Strategic organising)

This guide is one of many key organising resources in the Organising to Win series. UNISON activists and staff can access all resources at:

The Organising Space

UNISON's online platform for activists. Visit the Organising to Win tile at organisingspace.unison.org.uk

Pearl, The UNISON staff intranet. Visit the Organising to Win page.

Had an organising win? Send a summary of it to win@unison.co.uk