

[Home](#) → [Resources](#) → Finding Your Place

# Finding Your Place When You Don't Fit the Mold

*Your difference is your strength*

 15 minute read

## You Belong Here

Let's start with this truth: The organizing world needs you exactly as you are. Not a watered-down version. Not after you've learned to "fit in." Right now, with all your differences and perspectives.

Maybe you've walked into organizing spaces and felt that familiar discomfort. The unspoken dress codes. The assumed shared experiences. The references that sail over your head. The feeling that everyone else got a manual you never received.

Or perhaps you've been welcomed... as the representative of your entire identity.

The only young person. The sole person of color. The designated "voice of" whatever makes you different. Valued for your demographic checkbox rather than your ideas and skills.

This guide is for anyone who's ever felt like they're organizing from the margins. It's about finding spaces that honor your whole self, building networks that sustain you, and yes, sometimes creating entirely new tables when the existing ones don't have room.

Your experiences outside the mainstream aren't obstacles to overcome. They're perspectives that can transform movements. Let's talk about how to navigate organizing spaces while keeping your authentic self intact.

## Assessing Organizing Spaces

Not all organizing spaces are created equal. Some will nurture your growth and value your contributions. Others will drain your energy and tokenize your presence. Learning to tell the difference early can save you years of frustration.

### Reading the Room: What to Look For

#### **Green Flags: Signs of Inclusive Spaces**

- **Multiple leadership styles:** Not everyone leads by being the loudest voice
- **Acknowledgment of different capacities:** Recognition that people contribute differently based on resources, abilities, and life circumstances

- **Transparent decision-making:** Clear processes that don't rely on insider knowledge
- **Active facilitation:** Someone ensures multiple voices are heard, not just the usual suspects
- **Flexibility in participation:** Multiple ways to engage beyond just showing up to meetings
- **Explicit values:** Stated commitment to inclusion backed by actual practices
- **Growth mindset:** Mistakes are learning opportunities, not permanent marks against you

### ► **Red Flags: Warning Signs to Heed**

- **"We don't see color/class/difference":** Refusing to acknowledge difference usually means refusing to address inequality
- **Homogeneous leadership:** If everyone in charge looks the same, there's probably a reason
- **Insider culture:** Lots of in-jokes, assumed knowledge, or "that's just how we do things"
- **Defensiveness about feedback:** Suggestions about inclusion are treated as attacks
- **Burnout as badge of honor:** Exhaustion is expected and celebrated
- **Tokenizing behavior:** You're introduced primarily by your identity markers

- **Savior mentality:** The group positions itself as helping "those people" rather than working alongside community

## The Assessment Practice

Before committing deeply to any organizing space, give yourself permission to assess. Attend a few meetings as an observer. Notice:

- Who speaks most? Who stays quiet?
- What assumptions are made about participants' resources, time, or knowledge?
- How are disagreements handled?
- What happens when someone doesn't understand something?
- Are there unwritten rules everyone seems to know but you?

Trust your gut. If a space consistently makes you feel smaller, less capable, or like you need to hide parts of yourself, that's valuable information. You deserve organizing spaces that energize rather than drain you.

## Building Your Network

Isolation is one of the biggest challenges when you don't fit the organizing mold. Building a network that sustains you requires intentionality, especially when traditional networking approaches might not work for your situation.

## Finding Your People

## Strategy: The Constellation Approach

Instead of looking for one perfect group, build a constellation of connections.

Different people and spaces can meet different needs:

- **Mentors:** People further along who share some aspect of your experience
- **Peers:** Others navigating similar challenges right now
- **Bridge-builders:** People who can translate between you and mainstream spaces
- **Sanctuary spaces:** Where you can be fully yourself without explanation
- **Skills partners:** People who complement what you bring

## Creating Connection

Traditional networking advice often assumes privileges you might not have: money for coffee meetings, time for evening events, comfort in loud social spaces. Here are alternatives:

- **Digital organizing:** Online spaces can be more accessible and allow you to control your engagement level
- **Skill shares:** Offer to teach something you know in exchange for learning something you need
- **Working meetings:** Bond while doing the work rather than separate social events

- **One-on-one connections:** Build deep relationships rather than working the room
- **Affinity spaces:** Seek out caucuses or groups for people who share aspects of your identity



**Also covered in:** Building connections on limited time and resources is explored further in our "Time Arithmetic for Busy People Who Care" guide.

## Maintaining Boundaries

When you're one of few people like you in organizing spaces, requests can pile up quickly. You might become the go-to person for every diversity panel, every identity-related question, every time the group needs to prove it's inclusive. Setting boundaries isn't selfish; it's survival.

### Practice: The Rotation Response

When asked to be the sole representative: "I appreciate you thinking of me. Who else from [community] have you reached out to? I'd be happy to suggest some names so we can rotate this responsibility."

## Navigating Tokenism

Let's name it: Sometimes you're not invited for your skills or ideas. You're invited to

make an organization look diverse. To check a box. To shield them from criticism. Recognizing tokenism doesn't mean assuming bad intent, but it does mean protecting yourself from its effects.

## Spotting Tokenism

Signs you might be experiencing tokenism:

- You're constantly asked to speak "on behalf of" your entire community
- Your opinions on issues unrelated to your identity are dismissed or ignored
- You're featured prominently in promotional materials but excluded from decision-making
- You're expected to educate others about your identity without compensation
- Your presence is used to deflect criticism about lack of diversity
- You're only consulted on issues directly related to your identity

## Responding to Tokenism

### The Redirect Technique

When positioned as the sole voice: "I can share my personal perspective, but it's important to note that [community] is not monolithic. What processes do we have for gathering broader input?"

### The Expansion Move

When pigeonholed into identity-based work only: "I'm happy to contribute to the diversity committee, and I'd also like to be involved in [strategic planning/fundraising/direct action]. How can I engage with both?"

## Using Tokenism Strategically

Sometimes you might choose to accept a tokenizing position to achieve specific goals. That's valid. If you do:

- Be clear about your objectives
- Set a timeline for achievement or exit
- Build in support systems
- Use your position to create structural change
- Document everything for those who come after

## Starting Your Own Table

Sometimes the answer isn't finding a seat at existing tables. Sometimes it's building your own. Creating new organizing spaces can feel daunting, but remember: every established organization started with someone saying "what if we did this differently?"

## When to Build New

Consider starting something new when:



- Existing spaces consistently fail to address core needs
- You've found others experiencing similar exclusion
- There's work that needs doing but no one's doing it
- Current approaches aren't reaching your community
- You have energy for building, not just reforming

## Starting Small and Sustainable

### The Kitchen Table Model

You don't need an office, board of directors, or 501(c)(3) status to organize. Start with:

- 3-5 people who share your vision
- A regular meeting time (virtual is fine)
- One concrete goal
- Rotating responsibilities
- Built-in evaluation points

## Centering Different Values

When you build new tables, you get to set new rules. Consider centering:

- **Multiple ways of knowing:** Not just academic or professional expertise
- **Different capacities:** People contribute what they can, when they can

- **Collective care:** Check-ins, mutual support, sustainability
- **Cultural practices:** Integrate traditions that mainstream spaces ignore
- **Accessibility first:** Build in rather than retrofit

Remember: You're not being divisive by creating spaces that center different people and approaches. You're being generative. Every new table creates more room for everyone.



**Also covered in:** For financial strategies for new organizing spaces, see our "Organizing on a Budget" guide.

## Code-Switching Survival

Code-switching – adjusting your behavior, language, or presentation for different contexts – is a survival skill many of us develop early. In organizing spaces, it can be both a useful tool and an exhausting necessity. Let's talk about doing it consciously and sustainably.

### When and How to Code-Switch

Strategic code-switching might involve:

- **Language adjustment:** Using jargon when it opens doors, plain speak when

it builds bridges

- **Presentation choices:** Dressing up for the legislature, down for community meetings
- **Communication styles:** Written for formal processes, verbal for relationship building
- **Cultural references:** Choosing what to explain, what to let slide
- **Energy modulation:** Matching the room when strategy demands it

## The Cost of Constant Switching

While code-switching can be strategic, constant shifting takes a toll:

- Mental exhaustion from constant translation
- Loss of authentic voice
- Imposter syndrome intensification
- Resentment buildup
- Physical stress manifestations

## Sustainable Switching Strategies

### The Recovery Ritual

Build in recovery time after intensive code-switching:

- Call a friend who gets it
- Listen to affirming content

- Do something that connects you to your authentic self
- Physical movement to shake off the performance
- Journal about the experience

### **The Teaching Moment**

Sometimes, instead of switching, educate: "In my community, we approach this differently. Here's what that might offer this conversation..."

## **Building Code-Free Zones**

Sustainability requires spaces where you never have to switch:

- Regular time with people who share your background
- Online communities where your full self is welcome
- Cultural events that feed your spirit
- Physical spaces that feel like home
- Creative outlets for authentic expression

## **Next Steps**

Finding your place in organizing isn't a one-time achievement. It's an ongoing practice of assessment, boundary-setting, network-building, and sometimes, table-

creating. Here's how to begin:

## This Week

- Assess one organizing space you're currently in using the green/red flags framework
- Identify one person who might become part of your constellation
- Practice one boundary-setting script in a low-stakes situation

## This Month

- Connect with at least one person who shares some aspect of your experience
- Try one new organizing space or approach
- Document what works and doesn't work for you

## Ongoing

- Regular check-ins about where you're thriving vs. surviving
- Building both inside and outside strategies
- Contributing to making spaces more inclusive for others
- Celebrating the strength your difference brings

Your perspectives, experiences, and ways of being aren't bugs to be fixed. They're features that can transform movements. The organizing world doesn't need another copy of what already exists. It needs you, in all your authentic, mold-breaking glory.

