

Measuring What Matters in Movement Work

Small wins are still wins

Feeling uncertain about whether your organizing efforts make a difference? Learn how to recognize real impact, track meaningful progress, and celebrate the victories that keep movements alive.



Estimated read time: 15 minutes

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The Impact Uncertainty Problem

After weeks of phone banking, months of meetings, or years of organizing, have you ever wondered: "Is any of this actually making a difference?" You're not alone. The gap between our daily organizing activities and systemic change can feel impossibly wide. Media celebrates overnight victories while ignoring the years of groundwork. Opponents of change want you to feel this way.

Here's what they don't want you to know: movements are built on accumulated small actions. Every conversation matters. Every meeting builds capacity. Every failed campaign teaches lessons. The problem isn't that your work doesn't matter. The problem is that we're measuring with the wrong ruler.

This guide helps you recognize the real impact you're having, track progress in meaningful ways, and sustain yourself through the long haul of movement building. Because burnout often comes not from hard work, but from feeling like that work doesn't matter.

Remember: If your work truly didn't matter, those in power wouldn't spend so much energy trying to stop you. Opposition is often proof of impact.

Redefining Success in Organizing

Traditional metrics of success come from the business world: dollars raised, members recruited, bills passed. While these matter, they miss most of what makes movements powerful. Real organizing success is multidimensional and often invisible in the moment.

Beyond Win/Lose Thinking

Not every campaign ends in victory, but every campaign can build power. Consider these alternative success metrics:

Relationships Built

Every new connection strengthens the movement's web. Count coffee meetings, introductions made, and trust developed.

Skills Developed

What can you do now that you couldn't before? Public speaking, meeting facilitation, and research all build collective capacity.

Consciousness Raised

How many people now understand issues differently? Changing minds is invisible but essential work.

Networks Strengthened

Groups working together, sharing resources, and coordinating action multiply everyone's power.

Narrative Shifted

When media, officials, or community members use your language, you've changed the conversation.

Opposition Activated

If powerful interests mobilize against you, you're threatening their status quo. That's impact.

The Ripple Effect

Your impact extends far beyond what you can see:

- The person you registered to vote becomes a lifelong civic participant
- The teenager at your rally becomes tomorrow's movement leader
- The conversation you started continues in homes across your community
- The tactic you pioneered gets adapted by movements worldwide
- The hope you kindled keeps someone else going

Your Personal Impact Tracker

Tracking your impact isn't about ego or performance metrics. It's about recognizing your contribution, learning from experience, and sustaining yourself for the long haul. Here's a practical system:

Weekly Impact Check-In

Every week, spend 10 minutes recording:

- **Actions taken:** What did you actually do? (calls made, meetings attended, people contacted)
- **People reached:** Who did you connect with? (names, not just numbers)
- **Skills practiced:** What did you get better at?
- **Lessons learned:** What worked? What didn't?
- **Energy level:** How sustainable did this week feel?

Monthly Milestone Review

Once a month, look for patterns:

- **Consistent actions:** What habits are you building?
- **Growing edges:** Where are you stretching yourself?
- **Relationship map:** Who's in your organizing network now?
- **Skill progression:** What feels easier than before?
- **Joy moments:** When did organizing feel good?

Quarterly Big Picture

Every three months, zoom out:

- **Movement progress:** How has your issue/campaign advanced?
- **Personal growth:** How have you changed as an organizer?
- **Network expansion:** How many more people are involved?
- **Narrative shifts:** What conversations have changed?
- **Unexpected outcomes:** What surprised you?

Making It Stick

The best tracking system is one you'll actually use:

- Keep it simple: A notebook, spreadsheet, or voice memos all work
- Set reminders: Calendar alerts help build the habit
- Share with others: Accountability buddies make it more likely
- Focus on growth: This isn't about judgment, it's about recognition
- Adapt as needed: Your system should serve you, not constrain you

Collective Impact Assessment

Individual tracking matters, but movements are collective. Assessing impact together builds shared understanding and stronger strategy. Here's how to evaluate

collectively:

Group Reflection Practices

After-Action Reviews

Following any campaign or action:

1. What were we trying to achieve?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why were there differences?
4. What can we learn for next time?
5. What should we celebrate right now?

Story Circles

Monthly or quarterly gatherings where members share:

- A moment when they felt the campaign's impact
- A relationship that changed their perspective
- A skill they've developed through the work
- A victory they witnessed, however small
- A lesson they'll carry forward

Measuring Collective Power

Look for these indicators of growing collective strength:

- **Increased capacity:** Can you mobilize more people more quickly?
- **Deeper bench:** Are more people ready to lead?
- **Strategic evolution:** Are your tactics becoming more sophisticated?
- **Sustained energy:** Is momentum building or depleting?
- **External recognition:** Are decision-makers taking you seriously?
- **Defensive victories:** What bad things didn't happen because of your work?



Also covered in: For sustainable organizing practices that prevent burnout, see our "Time Arithmetic for Busy People Who Care" guide.

The Power of Celebration

Celebration isn't frivolous. It's fuel. Movements that last know how to mark victories, honor effort, and create joy even in struggle. Here's why celebration matters and how to do it well:

Why We Must Celebrate

- **Sustains morale:** Joy combats despair and cynicism
- **Builds culture:** Celebrations create shared memories and identity
- **Attracts others:** People join movements that feel alive
- **Marks progress:** Ritual helps us notice change
- **Honors sacrifice:** Acknowledges the real costs of organizing
- **Models the future:** Shows glimpses of the world we're building

Celebration Practices for Every Scale

Individual Wins (Daily)

- Share one good thing in group chats
- Keep a "wins journal"
- Give yourself credit before bed
- Text a friend about small victories

Team Victories (Weekly/Monthly)

- Start meetings with win shares
- Create victory walls (physical or digital)
- Milestone parties (calls made, doors knocked)
- Appreciation circles for contributors

Campaign Milestones (Quarterly)

- Public celebrations for partial wins

- Media moments highlighting progress
- Community dinners and gatherings
- Creative actions that show joy

Celebration Without Victory

Sometimes we need to celebrate effort, not outcomes:

- Honor the courage it took to try
- Recognize skills built through struggle
- Appreciate relationships forged in difficulty
- Name the narrative shifts achieved
- Celebrate survival itself as resistance

Cultural Note: Different communities celebrate differently. Make space for various expressions of joy, from quiet reflection to exuberant dancing. The best celebration is one where everyone feels included.

Small Wins Catalog

Need reminders of what counts as a win? Here's a catalog of victories often overlooked but deeply meaningful:

Individual Growth Wins

- Speaking up in a meeting for the first time
- Making a phone call despite anxiety
- Explaining an issue clearly to family
- Setting a boundary and maintaining it
- Asking for help when needed
- Taking rest without guilt

Relationship Building Wins

- Converting a skeptic to a supporter
- Connecting two people who needed to meet
- Repairing conflict within the group
- Getting someone to their first meeting
- Building trust across difference
- Creating space for quiet voices

Tactical Wins

- Media coverage of your issue
- Officials using your talking points
- Opposition having to respond to you
- Preventing something bad from happening
- Delaying harmful policies
- Creating costs for bad actors

Movement Building Wins

- New organization formed
- Coalition holds together through conflict
- Young person steps into leadership
- Skill successfully transferred to others
- Resource sharing becomes routine
- Victory in one place inspires another

Cultural Shift Wins

- Language changes in your community
- Previous opponents become neutral
- Issue moves from fringe to mainstream
- Art and culture reflect your message
- Children grow up with different assumptions
- What was impossible becomes inevitable

Every one of these "small" wins is a building block of transformation. Noticed and celebrated, they sustain movements through the long journey to larger victories.

Your Next Steps

Ready to start recognizing and celebrating your real impact? Here's how to begin:

This Week

1. **List three impacts** from your recent organizing, however small
2. **Tell someone** about one thing you're proud of accomplishing
3. **Start a simple tracker** - notebook, phone app, whatever works
4. **Notice others' wins** and name them out loud

This Month

1. **Establish a tracking rhythm** that fits your life
2. **Organize one celebration** - could be as simple as a group text thread
3. **Map your growth** by comparing your skills to six months ago
4. **Share this guide** with someone who doubts their impact

Ongoing Practices

- Build celebration into every meeting agenda
- Document victories for future organizers
- Resist "never enough" thinking
- Connect individual actions to collective impact
- Remember: if you're still here, you're winning

Your Impact Matters

Every call you make plants a seed. Every meeting you attend strengthens the web. Every action you take sends ripples you may never see. The powerful want you to feel powerless, insignificant, alone. Your continued organizing proves them wrong.

Small wins are still wins. And small wins, accumulated over time, topple empires.

