

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

Internal Organizing

Best Practices for IAFF Locals





Internal Organizing: Best Practices for IAFF Locals

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Building Strong Locals Through Internal Organizing

Introduction

As a labor union, our strength lies with our membership density and our ability to engage and mobilize our members around issues that affect you on the job and in your community. Regardless of the issue — whether it's pay and benefits, increased staffing, charitable or benevolent work or electing pro-fire fighter candidates to office, — our success is directly related to our membership density. If your membership density is low, decision makers will inevitably question your credibility, and your ability to advocate for fire fighters will be greatly diminished.

This manual provides a detailed roadmap to signing up non-members on the job, increasing your union density and building a core group of union activists through your newly formed Internal Organizing Committee.

Your efforts to sign up non-members will only be successful if those efforts are based **on systematic personal contact**. This means that Internal Organizing Committee members must make one-on-one or one-on-small group contact with every fire fighter. Unless non-members are beating down the door to join your local, you must go to them. Ideally, these conversations should take place in fire stations, around the kitchen table. We must meet fire fighters where they are both physically (at the firehouse) and in relation to their existing view of your union to begin a conversation.

Finally, as simple as it may sound, this manual is ultimately about helping you get in front of non-members and asking them to join your union. It is about building relationships with non-members and communicating the value of the IAFF. It is about demonstrating that we can do more together through the IAFF than we can as individual employees.



Engaging Members and Growing Your Local: Building Your Internal Organizing Committee

Your first step to increasing your membership density is to thoughtfully build an **Internal Organizing Committee**. The Internal Organizing Committee is the nucleus of your efforts to sign up non-members. Those who serve on this committee must be well respected by their co-workers. An individual who does not have a good work record or who is unpopular within the department is not a good candidate for the committee. The loudest, most opinionated voice is not always the right voice for this job.

- The Internal Organizing Committee must also be representative of your fire department demographics in terms of rank, assignment, age, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Your potential members must be able to see themselves represented in your internal organizing efforts.
- Internal Organizing Committee members should have the ability to answer questions about past victories, union history and current initiatives in your local.
- Those who serve on this committee must understand that internal organizing is labor intensive and time consuming. They must be willing to commit the necessary time to make the initiative a success.
- Internal Organizing Committee members must have effective communications skills and the ability to move others to take action.
- Target existing networks within the local and fire department to identify potential leaders to serve on the Internal Organizing Committee.

- Potential Existing Networks
 - Respected senior members of the local
 - Stewards, station representatives and committee chairs
 - Department “hard chargers” who are involved with training
 - Ethnic and other existing fraternal organizations
 - Consider recruiting connectors, experts, and persuaders (see chart below).

What does the Internal Organizing Committee do?

- Sign up new members
- Distribute literature and other union material to non-members
- Meet regularly to track progress of internal organizing efforts
- Conduct station visits and communicates a positive vision of the IAFF and the local
- Identify issues important to fire fighters and connect those issues to initiatives by the IAFF and the local
- Communicate pertinent information gathered during station visits to local executive board

Informal Leaders	Description	Characteristics to Look For
Connectors	Individual(s) who knows everyone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often refer to people they know or mention multiple names in conversation • Their names may come up often in conversation with different individuals • Member of diverse groups that often may not socialize (ie., bikers and techies) • Everyone knows who they are but not very well (but viewed with trust)
Experts	Individual(s) who knows everything about a specific topic and who are willing to share this information freely and enthusiastically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic and well versed in their interest/activity of choice • Admired by others for their demonstrated devotion to an interest/activity • Open to sharing information/resources, less interested in power/politics
Persuaders	Individual(s) who are well respected and have charisma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to make people relax and feel comfortable immediately • Expressive with an ability to convey persuasive emotion in conversation • Someone who easily becomes in synch with others regardless of how long or well they know them

Developing a Uniform Message: Talking Union

Once you have identified the members of the Internal Organizing Committee, it's time to bring committee members together to discuss developing a uniform message to non-members. Committee members must be able to address a wide array of topics that will inevitably be raised, showcase the value of the IAFF and relate a non-member's concerns to the work the IAFF is doing on their behalf. This is called talking union. The message must be consistent and delivered- in person to every non-member on the job.

Things to consider as you develop your uniform talking points:

- **Overall vision of your union.** While it is important to address the tangible benefits and current initiatives of your union, a critical piece of your uniform talking points should address the overall vision and mission of your union. This is where Internal Organizing Committee members plant a flag and offer a positive, proactive, pro-fire fighter vision and mission of your union.

Communicate to fire fighters that we can do more together through our union than we can as individual employees. Remember, everybody wants to be part of something that is good. Committee members must understand their own motivation and why they're union members and doing this work. This message should be articulated in a compelling way. The overall vision of the local should be transformational in nature.

- Talk about shared values (good pay and benefits, respect at work, fair promotional processes and grievance procedures, looking out for each other). Changes we want to make in our fire department should reflect those shared values.
- Talk about the fact that our list of shared values can only be accomplished by working together through our union.
- Connect with the personal experiences of our fellow fire fighters.
- **Local Focus.** Potential members may already support IAFF initiatives, but inevitably the question arises, "Yeah, the IAFF does good work, but what is the local here doing?" The internal messaging should also address what is happening at the local level to improve fire fighter working conditions.
 - Consider the following areas of local focus:
 - Wages and benefits
 - Fundraisers or support for personnel who have been negatively impacted by health care or other benefit issues
 - Staffing and service delivery
 - Fair promotional processes
 - Fair grievance procedures
 - Job security
 - Health and safety
 - Second set of turnout gear
 - Turnout gear washers
 - Hood exchange programs

- Current initiatives. Committee members should be able to speak in detail about current initiatives and tie these initiatives to the vision the union has for your workplace.
- Tangible benefits offered through membership. Committee members should share the economic value of IAFF membership. Compile a list of benefits and be able to answer detailed questions. Tie these products to the cost of dues and make the case that, from a consumer perspective, there is also an economic value of membership.

○ Examples:

- Representation and legal protections
- Collective bargaining (if applicable)
- Insurance products offered through membership
- IAFF Foundation programs and services
- IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery

Transactional Versus Transformational

The concept of transaction versus transformation addresses how the Internal Organizing Committee communicates the vision of the union you're trying to build: Is the vision transactional or transformational?

A vision that is solely transactional places your union on the same footing as an insurance policy. While it is important to communicate the tangible economic benefits provided by the IAFF and your local, such a narrow vision is not likely to create loyalty or build a group of union activists. Nobody is excited to pay their car insurance bill. As such, the IAFF should not be presented as solely a smart move for a savvy consumer.

A transformational message that provides a vision of your union as a tool to address fire fighter concerns as the main talking point will attract and inspire more union supporters. A transformational message communicates the overall vision of your union and says, "We can accomplish real change through our union."

Ultimately, all organizing conversations with non-members will be a mix of transactional and transformational. We must demonstrate the economic value of union membership. However, our strongest foot forward should always be transformational.

TRANSACTIONAL ONLY	TRANSFORMATIONAL
The union is presented as an insurance policy and is sold based on programs and benefits.	The IAFF and your local function as agents of positive change.
The union is viewed as a third-party that fixes problems.	Lifestyle changes are because of union victories that happen when we work together through our union.
Dues purchase a product.	Dues are investment in their future.
Creates customers.	Creates union activists.

How We Talk About Dues

One of the best methods to address concerns about dues payment is to divide the proposed monthly dues by four and discuss the cost per week. The weekly payment approach breaks the cost down into a more manageable amount. Contrast the cost of a weekly dues payment and the tangible products provided through dues with the amount of money a fire fighter might spend each week on other items (a cup of coffee or a six pack of beer). Dues should be represented as an investment in the fire fighter’s future.



The Stop Light Method: Using Your Duty Roster as a Roadmap

Bringing new members into your local will be based on systematic personal contact. An effective way to make this task more manageable is by color coding your fire department's duty roster. We call this **the stop light method**. By color coding your fire department duty roster, you create a visual roadmap that illustrates areas where union membership is low. The color-coded duty roster will give you the ability to track assessments of non-members by apparatus assignment, shift, battalion and fire station.

Step 1: Cross-reference your membership roster with the fire department duty roster. Highlight union members in green.

Step 2: Highlight all known anti-union personnel in red. These are personnel who have been vocally anti-union and actively oppose or criticize union efforts. The Internal Organizing Committee will engage with these personnel later.

Step 3: Highlight remaining non-members in yellow. These are personnel whose views on your local are unknown. As you begin your organizing efforts, you will focus on recruiting these personnel to union membership. It is likely most of your non-members will be highlighted in yellow.

Create a Plan

Once your duty roster is color-coded through the stop light method, you will have a visual roadmap for increased membership. Your next step is to decide where to begin your station visits. Think about this decision strategically. You may decide to visit the fire station with non-members who have been assessed entirely yellow. Conversely, you may also decide to visit stations with a high density of union members and just a few non-members assessed as yellow to make your recruitment efforts easier. You may also decide to visit a station that has highly influential or popular fire fighters who, if they become union supporters will then bring other fire fighters into your local. Regardless, this must be a strategic decision and you should only make it after closely examining your assessed duty roster.

Examine your assessed duty roster and determine the following for each individual fire fighter before your visit:

- **Existing relationships non-members have with members.** Do the personnel at the station you're visiting have a good relationship with a current member? For instance, think about personnel who have side jobs together, go fishing or take family vacations together. Ask members to assist in speaking with their friends who are non-members. Provide the member with your uniform talking points and have them speak to the non-member prior to your visit.
- **Known issues of concern or interests.** If there are known issues of concern or areas of interest among the non-members you're meeting with, be prepared to speak to those concerns and discuss how your local can have a positive impact on that issue.

Fire Station Visits

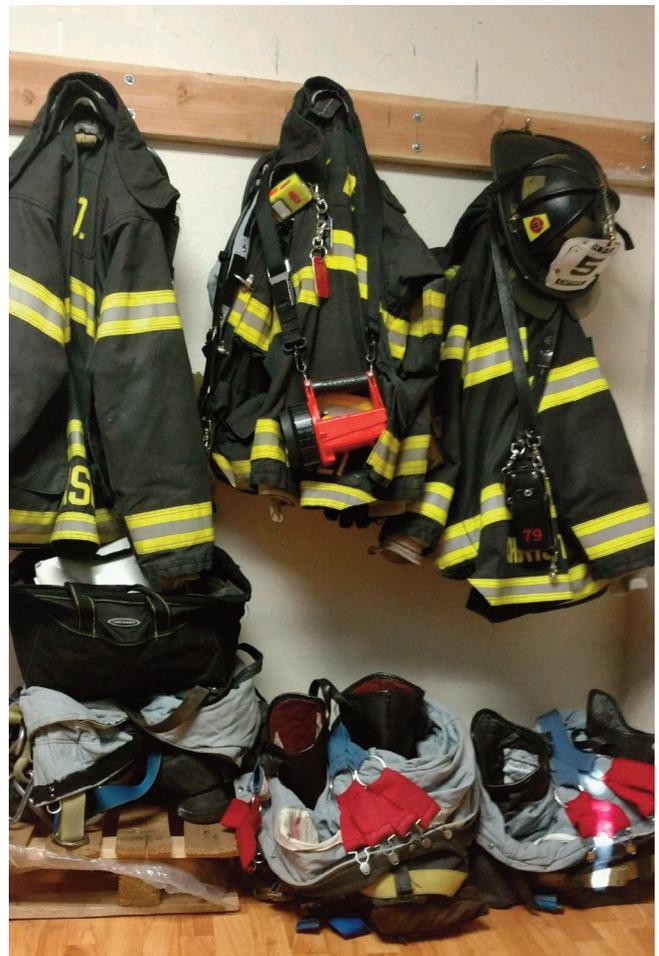
Your Internal Organizing Committee must meet fire fighters where they are at (not where we want them to be), both physically and regarding their existing view of your union.

Before the Visit:

- Know who is at the station — who is assigned and who might be detailed for the day.
- Know the fire department schedule for the day. Check the departmental activity calendar to make sure you are not scheduling a visit during a drill, EMT continuing education, public education events or other obligations.
- If possible, notify the company officer you will be coming.

Items to Bring:

- Membership applications
- Dues deduction form or other dues collection method material
- IAFF organizing folders
- Any locally produced organizing material
- Swag for fire fighters who join (local T-shirts, stickers, etc.).



During the Visit:

- Listen. Although your Internal Organizing Committee members are ultimately there to ask fire fighters to join the union, the station visit should not be a one-way conversation.
- Don't spend a lot of time telling war stories or talking about yourself.
- Don't lie. If you don't know the answer, say, "I don't know, but I will find out for you."
- Don't argue. You can be firm in your support for the union but do not engage in an argument. This is not productive and can alienate members and non-members alike.
- Identify supporters and potential leaders. During your station visits, you will identify informal leaders who are union supporters. Ask these informal leaders to become involved with internal organizing efforts.
- Make the ask. At the close of every meeting, ask non-members to join. Even if you feel the meeting did not go well, still make the ask.

Suggested Station Visit Agenda

It is important that Internal Organizing Committee members aren't just winging it when fire station visits begin. The committee members must be able to communicate the value of IAFF membership while also listening to the concerns of their fellow fire fighters. Remember, this conversation isn't a sales pitch. The items included in the suggested agenda may not happen in this exact order, but all points should be covered during the conversation.

- I **Getting to the Kitchen Table** (or wherever the fire fighters gather). A lot happens at the fire station kitchen table and this is one of the best places to meet. There's typically enough seating, everyone can see and hear, fire fighters are generally more comfortable talking and opening up at the kitchen table, and you're not standing up making a presentation. Of course, you can meet anywhere in the fire station where fire fighters are most comfortable.
- II **Introductions and Why You're Here.** In larger departments, you may not know everyone on the job. It's important to communicate who you are and why you're there. A good example is, "Hi everyone, I'm Shawn. I'm the engineer at Engine 7 on B-Shift. I'm a member of our union's Internal Organizing Committee and we're doing station visits to talk about the benefits of joining our union. We wanted to provide you with some information and talk about current union initiatives, but it's also really important to us to hear your concerns and thoughts on issues in the fire department."
- III **Listening.** Although you're there to ask non-members to join, it is just as important to listen to what your fellow fire fighters have to say. Find out more about them and show a genuine interest in their concerns. Here are a few things you should be listening for:
 - a. Issues important to fire fighters
 - b. Obstacles to joining
 - c. Opinions on current union initiatives
 - d. Identifying potential leaders and supporters
 - e. Identifying union-haters

Don't become defensive if non-members (or members for that matter) criticize the union or disagree with you on issues.

- IV **Communicating the Vision.** Once you learn what is important to non-members, you can relate that to what the union is doing or has done to address those concerns. This is talking union; you're communicating a vision of the union in which the union addresses important issues and makes fire fighters' lives better. Again, attach that vision to the concerns expressed in the visit. This is where you explain that, through their union, fire fighters can have a positive impact on their jobs.
- V **Make the Ask.** Always close the meeting with asking fire fighters to join. Always make the ask — even if you think the visit did not go well!

After the Visit:

- Immediately follow up on any questions or concerns asked by fire fighters that you were unable to answer. Ideally, you should provide this answer before their shift is over, even if you call them in the morning prior to shift-change.
- Reassess the duty roster to reflect information gathered during the visit. Change any new members from yellow to green. Change any anti-union personnel from yellow to red.
- Take detailed notes to report back to the Internal Organizing Committee. Obviously, you will report on any new members who have joined. It is equally as important to take notes on personnel who did not join. What questions did they ask? What topic seemed to peak their interest? Were they engaged in the meeting? These notes help you to create individualized talking points to revisit later with those fire fighters. Here is sample information from a station visit you should record:
 - Name, rank, station assignment.
 - Areas of concern within the department
 - Areas of concern in relation to the IAFF
 - If the fire fighter asked a question you were not immediately able to answer, what was it? Follow-up date for the answer you provided.
- Input new members into your local's database as soon as possible.
- Enter new members into the IAFF database as soon as possible.



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