
Organizing for Your Ethical Principles

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Employer deliberately elided

#QConNYC, June 27, 2018

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**Not my employer's
opinions.**

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Close your eyes.

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Open your eyes.

1. Why organize?

Working Conditions

Examples:

- Pay and leveling
- Unjust treatment
- Excessive hours
- Harassment/discrimination
- Hostile work environment

Many other examples.

Product Ethics

Examples:

- Discriminating against minorities
 - Poor accessibility
 - Machine learning bias
- Aiding in unlawful acts
 - Volkswagen (fraud)
 - La Liga (eavesdropping)

Or both -- e.g. **collaborating with ICE**. *Many other examples.*

Ethics of Tech Ecosystem

Examples:

- "Independent" contractors & gig economy
- Cafeteria workers and bus drivers
- Gentrification
- Digital divide
- Tech lobbying

Many other examples.

Intersections

Is it okay to ask someone to work on a project that harms or excludes them, or **harms or excludes members of a group they belong to?**

Is it okay to subject external-facing employees to receiving **abuse on the company's products** due to poor product design?

Intersections

Is it okay to build concentration camps?

What about crimes against humanity?

What about family back home in another country?

Your Ethics Matter

Unjust treatment of employees is not okay.

Unjust treatment of users of technology is not okay.

Unjust treatment of our neighbors is not okay.

We can change tech, together.

How do we fix this?

I've had a few successes.



15 years in tech

2 years as a manager (now no longer)

Queer transgender woman of color

Labor organizer & activist for 8 years

Activism work covered in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Gizmodo*, *Bloomberg*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and other media.

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I am not a lawyer.

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**I'm tired and need
your help.**

What we'll cover:

1. Why organize?
2. Skills overlap
3. Risks & protections
4. Organizing best practices
5. Resources

2. Skills overlap

Incident Management

Clearly Delegate Roles

Maintain clarity of command structure

Designate an **Incident Commander**

Designate clear roles for each participant

Avoid freelancing outside responsibilities & chain of command.

Learn from events

Blameless retrospectives.

Collective behavior and systems, not individuals.

Contributing factors

"**What** did you think was happening?", not "**Why** did you do that?". *[h/t @auxesis on Twitter]*

Protest Coordination

The Spokescouncil model

e.g anti-fascist organizers in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Organizations make group commitments.

Spokespeople coordinate actions.

No blame or excess pressure on individuals.

The St. Paul Principles

1. *Respect for a diversity of tactics and plans of other groups.*
2. *Maintain a separation of time or space in actions/tactics.*
3. *Any debates or criticisms will stay internal to the movement, avoiding public denunciations of fellow activists and events.*
4. *Oppose state surveillance, infiltration, disruption, and violence. **Don't assist law enforcement against activists.***

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Our skills are useful.

3. Risks & Protections

Company Cultures

"Do good" principles.

Companies claim to want vigorous sharing, debate & employees coming forward about issues.

Make use of your company's cultural statements.

Engineers are valuable

Replacing an engineer costs \$x00,000

GDPR.

Collective action & solidarity

Limits: Lanetix layoffs

Protected Concerted Activity

National Labor Relations Act (1935)

Available to non-supervisors in the US

"Two or more employees acting together to improve wages or **working conditions**"

Forbids "adverse action against employees because of their protected, concerted activities"

[nlrb.gov/rights-we-protect/protected-concerted-activity](https://www.nlrb.gov/rights-we-protect/protected-concerted-activity)

Title VII

Civil Rights Act (1964)

Available to **all** employees, including supervisors.

Requires "opposing unlawful employment practices";
membership in group discriminated against not required

Forbids retaliation.

[eoc.gov/laws/guidance/retaliation-guidance.cfm](https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/retaliation-guidance.cfm)

Whistleblowing

Federal employee whistleblower protections are weak :(

Private sector not covered, except public health/safety risks.

Risk of collateral damage.

Be prepared to resign or lose your job.

Be prepared for the worst.

Remedies are retrospective.

Retaliation often happens.

What is your backup plan?

What is **our** collective plan?

To the executives+managers: Is your company prepared to handle ethical escalations?

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**Change is worth the
cost.**

4. Successful Organizing

1. Early awareness

Changing decisions is easier before shipping

Fast iteration/feedback

Listen to colleagues & customers

Diverse networks matter

2. Building Employee Networks

Communicate outside your working group

Mailing lists, social media, and in-person gatherings

Include people different from you

Actively listen and empathize

Build trust

3. Venting vs. Problem-Solving

Listen vs. fix

Emotional vs. rational content

Safe places to vent "in person"

Advocacy != venting

The New York Times rule



4. Identifying Decision-Makers

Don't attack the messenger/team

Ask exploratory questions ("If not you, who would know?").

Develop sources in management

Cultivate allies among leadership

5. Effective Persuasion

Assume good faith

Assumptions, priorities, values, & engagement may differ

How can the result be achieved differently?

No pitchfork mobs or attacks against strawpeople

Be trustworthy.

6. If all else fails...

Break glass:

- Employee petitions
 - Succinct, clear ask
 - 5% = credible threat
- Media engagement
 - Public pressure entrenches execs/PR
 - Situationally powerful.
- Complaints to regulators, directors, & shareholders
 - Less well-trodden territory
- Quit



7. Avoiding Burnout

You are not your employer.

It's okay to take a step back.

Progress can take years.

Form long-term working groups.

8. Virtuous Cycles

Ethics is an integral part of our job.

Ethics crises are a process failure.

Continuous {integration, deployment, **ethics**}

We need robust, reusable infrastructure.

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**"Crises are simply a
scarcity of time and
attention."**

--@EmilyGorcenski

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**Be proactive.
Prevent crises.
Pick fights carefully.**

5. Resources

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Coworker.org

Helped Google employees develop an organizing and media strategy around workplace safety.

Helped REI, Starbucks, and Publix employees campaign for better working conditions.

Can help you!

Tech Workers Coalition

Response to Lanetix employee layoffs.

Solidarity for cafeteria workers at Facebook unionized by Silicon Valley Rising.

Can help you!

Journalists

Know reporters' beats and angles.

Write out talking points.

Reporters aren't scary.

Talk to me for recommendations.

Thank you, and rise up!
#TechWontBuildIt

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Q&A: Chatham House Rules No Recording