GROUNDBREAKERS

HOW OBAMA'S 2.2 MILLION VOLUNTEERS TRANSFORMED CAMPAIGNING IN AMERICA

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5.

CREATING A STRUCTURE TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITY
Neighborhood Teams

> Volunteer recruitment and retention is the most important aspect of our field program. We cannot achieve the sheer volume of what we need in order to win without their help.
>
> *—OFA-Ohio training document, 2008*

> This is your subsection of it. This is your community.
>
> *—Gabe Lifton-Zoline, Colorado Field Director 2012*

When looking through the rose-colored glasses of victory, observers across the political spectrum have argued that the Obama campaign was one of the most sophisticated field campaigns in memory. Bird describes it as "the strongest grassroots organization in the history of American presidential politics," and even GOP strategists concede that the Obama campaign, with its rigid yet transparent structure, was far superior to both the McCain and Romney operations. Yet many accounts of the campaign overlook the significance of the Obama neighborhood teams. The vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party, Blaise Ingoglia, said as much: "When people asked me what happened last November, why did we lose, I break it down like this: We got out-worked, we got out-messaged, and we got out-organized. And to put it bluntly: we got our clocks cleaned.... Whether you like it or not, Barack Obama has changed the game when it comes to politics by using social media and microtargeting."[1]

As with many appraisals of Obama's campaign operation, Ingoglia's focus on OFA's technological prowess misses the human side of the campaign—the hundreds of thousands of people who devoted more than ten hours per week to the campaign for no pay. When Obama spoke to his campaign staff a few months before the 2008 election, he focused on the organizing. "When I started this campaign," Obama said, "I wasn't sure that I was going to be the best of candidates. But what I was absolutely positive of was the possibility of creating the best organization." He went on to repeat one of the hallmark refrains of his campaign:

> What I was always confident about, was that if people will to submerge their own egos, and bring their particular gifts, passion, energy, and vision to a common task, that great things can be accomplished. That's my old organizing mindset. It's not just a gimmick, it's not just a shtick—I actually believe in it.[2]

For OFA's field leaders, the success or failure of the field model hinged on enabling volunteer teams to take responsibility for organizing, persuading, and turning out voters. One of OFA's proudest feats was building 10,000 neighborhood teams composed of 30,000 dedicated core team members. But how did the campaign manage all of the volunteers with whom they were building relationships, and, moreover, ensure they stayed focused on the work of the campaign? Relying on volunteers to run the ground game was one of the biggest departures OFA made from previous campaigns. How could they make it work and avoid the pitfalls that are commonly associated with volunteers—"flakiness," lack of focus, disorganization, or low productivity?

This chapter describes the structure that OFA created to manage, motivate, coordinate, and empower volunteers: the neighborhood team. We show how the campaign used this structure to distribute responsibility for actual campaign outcomes to local Obama supporters. By opting for a framework that held teams—rather than a single heroic leader—accountable, OFA created the space for ordinary citizens to learn to work collectively to achieve their goals.

MANAGING AND MOTIVATING VOLUNTEERS: THE NEIGHBORHOOD TEAM

The neighborhood team model uniquely solved many of the challenges OFA faced in organizing its volunteers. First, how do you cultivate volunteer motivation? Researchers argue that when people are organized to work in teams, they become committed not only to the cause, but also to each other.[3] Some scholars argue that Obama and his "words inspired millions to contribute to and work for his campaign."[4] Indeed, while one-third of our respondents cited their admiration for Obama himself as the reason they initially sought out OFA, none reported that the force of his personality motivated them through, in the case of organizers, 90-hour work weeks "for little pay and even less sleep."[5] Instead, what kept them going was the commitment they had to other people in their organizing region and on their team. Diviney, the volunteer from North Carolina, describes her team:

> [L]et me give you an idea of my team: When they found out my husband was in the hospital—we had been talking that after Christmas we would all get together and have a sort of a New Year's party. We'd had our Christmas party at my house. So after New Year's, my husband got sick. And so…my team members said to me, "We will not have our party until you can go. We'll wait until your husband is home from the hospital before we'll have our party so that you don't have to choose between going to the hospital and seeing your husband and going to the party."

Through the neighborhood teams, volunteers developed relationships with each other that became the basis of their commitment. It was not just their "affect toward the candidate," but also their relationships with each other that animated and sustained the field staff and volunteers' organizing and voter contact work.[6]

Second, if a field operation wants volunteers to assume real responsibilities—like running staging locations without staff support during GOTV—it has to enable that work. How do campaigns provide the clarity and coordination necessary for volunteers to take on leadership
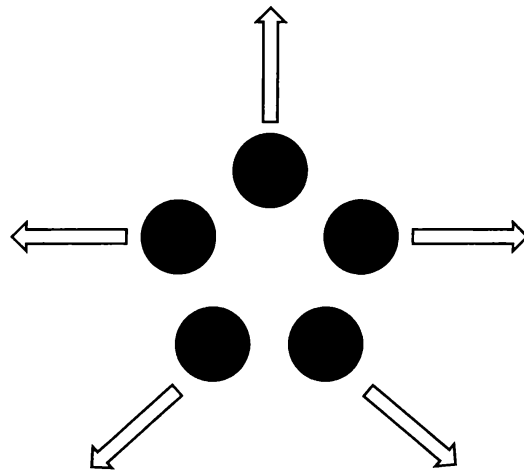
FIGURE 5.1: Leadership structure that lacks clarity and coordination

A leadership structure without any authority often results in a lack of direction, efforts that work at cross-purposes, and, consequently, stymied capacity. Figure based on Marshall Ganz's teaching materials.

roles in a national campaign? OFA recognized that motivation is not enough. Howard Dean, as we've described before, also had a feverish following of "Deaniacs," yet their enthusiasm did not translate into results. Figure 5.1, taken from OFA's 2008 General Election training manual, demonstrates the danger of working in a group of people that lacks coordination and clarity about its shared purpose. Originating from Ganz's course materials, the diagram illustrates how, in this system, nobody is responsible for coordinating everyone, for resolving impasses, or for taking "ultimate responsibility for the outcome," as the manual instructs. Without coordination, the team cannot produce strategic results for the campaign.

Third, how do you avoid overburdening your volunteers? Sometimes, the alternative to the uncoordinated model above is to have one person in charge, as depicted in Figure 5.2. As the OFA training manual writes (again, borrowing language from Ganz): "Sometimes, we think the leader is the person everyone goes to, which ends up looking like this:"

"But what does it feel like to be the 'leader' in the middle? What does it feel like to be the arrow that can't get through? What happens if the 'leader' in the middle drops out?"

FIGURE 5.2: **Leadership structure with no shared responsibility**
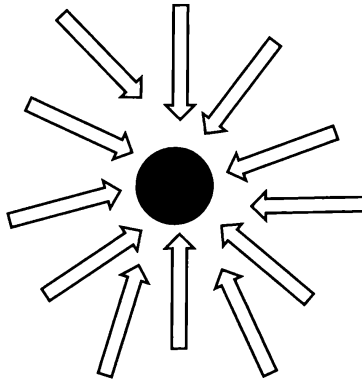*A single volunteer responsible for all leadership and execution also precludes capacity growth. In this situation, many voices are excluded and team performance can be reduced to a single person's efforts. Figure based on Marshall Ganz's teaching materials.*

To address these challenges, OFA relied on the neighborhood team model. It is no accident that when talking about the Obama field operation, people often refer to the entire program as the "team model." This was the core structural innovation of the OFA field campaign. The team model fosters relationships within groups of people while providing them with a structure for getting work done. By linking team members together in interdependent roles, the team structure provided the coordination and clarity necessary to help the team meet its goals without overburdening any one person. Interdependent roles meant that each person on the team had a unique role to play, but no one person could get her work done without coordinating with others.

Cheryl Ellis, who lives in a suburban, formerly farmland area outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, pointedly observed that, "[With OFA], people don't just have titles just to have titles. They have titles because they have shown that they're able to do the work and to make it happen and whatever the ask is, they're able to do it." Contrasting this model "side-by-side" with the Democratic Party in her county, Ellis said, "OFA is so much more effective because people know when they get involved with OFA, we are actually going to do the work that's going to make a difference."

In 2012, OFA charged field organizers with building, on average, three to four neighborhood teams. The leadership diorama of a FO

Legend
FO: Field organizer
NTL: Neighborhood team leader
CTM: Core team member
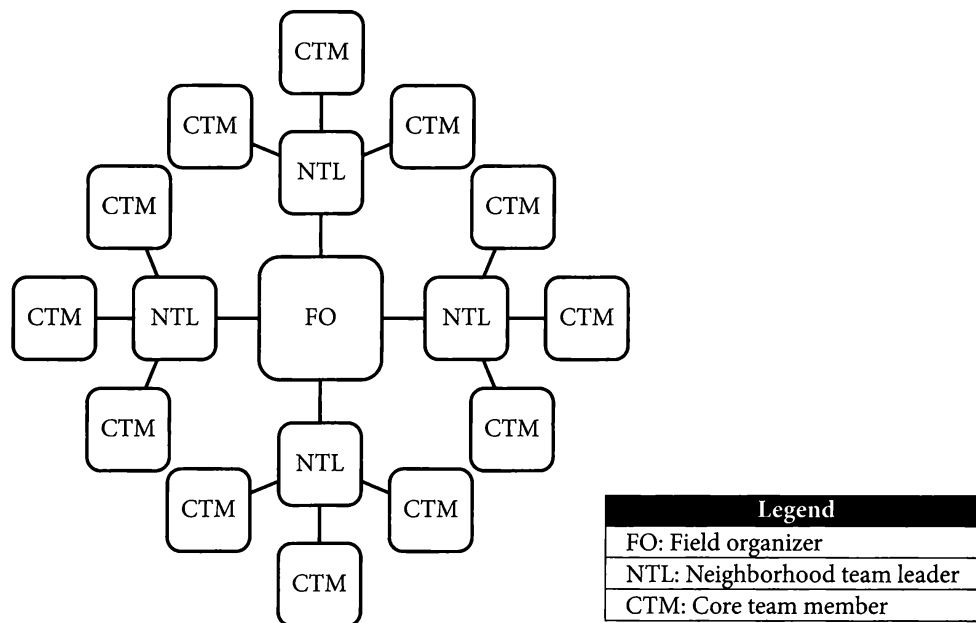
FIGURE 5.3: A field organizer's interdependent neighborhood team structure, called a "snowflake"

Field organizers were responsible for building as few as two and as many as seven neighborhood teams. This range reflects the different phases at which the organizers joined the campaign, as well as the distinct turf types and demographics to which they could be assigned.

would look something like Figure 5.3, with each neighborhood team leader representing the nucleus of a neighborhood team. The interlocking relationships among people on the teams gave this model its colloquial name, the "snowflake" model.

In the above, ideal scenario, a paid OFA field organizer would be the leader in the middle, guiding volunteer efforts and being held accountable for outcomes. However, his or her success was not about how much voter contact he could produce on his own. Instead, meeting goals was entirely contingent on his or her relationships with others—most importantly, with the volunteers who accepted the responsibility of becoming neighborhood team leaders. A further, crucial dimension of the organizer's success was his or her ability to support the neighborhood team leaders in getting their teams to work autonomously.

Thus, the only way staff and volunteers could meet their ground game goals was by developing the leadership skills of others. Neighborhood

team leaders (NTLs) were directly responsible for the execution of OFA's most important field activities: registering, persuading, and mobilizing voters through millions of personal conversations. To execute such tactics successfully, NTLs had to recruit and train core team members (CTMs) who would oversee each of these voter contact activities, as well as ensure that the team had enough volunteer capacity to meet its ever-increasing goals as the election neared. Further, the NTLs (who became staging location directors, or SLDs, during GOTV) were responsible for reporting the number of voter registration forms collected, calls, and knocks on a weekly basis to their field organizer, and at hourly intervals in the final phase of the campaign. By design, the number of GOTV staging locations—5,117—matched the minimum number of volunteer leaders the campaign had to confirm, because NTLs were expected to transition into the role of running their neighborhood's staging location. This final number of staging locations was roughly half the number of neighborhood team leaders that OFA organizers had recruited nationwide. In the run-up to the election, many teams were fused because it often made more logistical sense to house two teams in one location and under one leader, a testament to how local the OFA field operation was in most battleground states.

Given this structure, our interviewees reported that weak or absent neighborhood teams corresponded with underperformance, and strong team leadership correlated with high levels of voter contact. Kutscher, the NTL quoted in chapter 4, described how his team consistently won the state's voter contact competitions: Each week, two times a week, he and his wife held a two-hour phone bank in their home. Kutscher's goal was to maximize the number of volunteer team members who attended. In this way, every Wednesday and Sunday evening leading up to the election, his house was abuzz with conversations with persuadable voters. "Our group was so powerful and the groups that spun-off of it were so strong that for a long time, Sean, who was our field organizer, beat every other field organizer in the state for months and months and months, and it was all because of us. He knew. I mean, he joked about it."

To build teams like Kutscher's, OFA began by teaching organizers the leadership model that depends, once again, on "enabling others to

accept responsibility."[7] This approach to leadership was a dramatic shift for volunteers who had been exposed to the classic party-led field programs. Diviney recalled that "Kerry and Edwards put two paid staffers in the state of North Carolina. They operated on a wheel and spoke model [as depicted in Figure 5.1]....I worked through the county party framework, which I found to be a very dispiriting experience. So when my friend suggested we go to the Obama office, I knew that I was not going back to the county Democratic office."[8]

The core task for field organizers, then, was to identify, recruit, and develop people like Kutscher and Diviney to become leaders in the neighborhood team structure. "These leaders will be the backbone of your operation, and you must be able to trust them to delegate responsibility to other dedicated people, and to follow through on commitments," OFA's 2012 training materials read. Developing these leaders requires delegating responsibility (as opposed to tasks), and holding others accountable for carrying out that responsibility. OFA knew that its volunteers had the local knowledge and relationships that a newly arrived, fresh-out-of-college field organizer could never build in just a few months. One regional field director in Iowa, Kate Cummings, empowered her field organizers by telling them that "they were the field director for their turf." Field directors, the organizers knew, were not the ones going door-to-door. Cummings's framing meant that they were expected to build the infrastructure of the operation that would produce the results for which they would be held accountable—not to perform the voter contact work themselves.

Magnifying the snowflake model one degree further, according to 2012 training documents developed by OFA's national training director, Sara El-Amine, the ideal neighborhood team passes through five phases. The first is merely the potential for a team. When she first arrives in her turf, an organizer may have a list of 100 possible Obama supporters, none of whom she has a relationship with yet, and none of whom are organized among themselves in a leadership configuration, let alone in teams. In the second phase, "team formation," the volunteers pass through the early stages of growth and leadership development, the indicators of which are "active volunteers and perhaps one

confirmed NTL or CTM," according to OFA's 2012 training materials. In the third phase, the team is formed and functioning, with a confirmed NTL but without a complete leadership core. In phase four, a "developed team" is well-established. This is the phase when it is most productive. The indicators for this phase are an experienced NTL with at least three CTMs. One top field staffer said that the final stage of development is when a team understands its roles and goals and can "help mentor new teams."

One state-level field staffer recalled one such team in Nashua: It was so complete that its volunteer leader traveled throughout the state to mentor new NTLs "because she understood her role so well that she was just there talking about it, as an organizer." In phase five, which "only large and developed teams might go through," new staff starts in a turf and teams are split in two, focusing on an even more locally demarcated team turf.

Figure 5.4 depicts what an OFA neighborhood team might look like in phase four.

OFA Neighborhood Team
NTL: Neighborhood team leader

CTMs: Core team members
   •   CC: Canvass captain (doors)
   •   PBC: Phone bank captain
   •   DC: Data captain (data entry)
   •   VC: Volunteer coordinator
   •   *Optional:* Voter registration captain; Youth ("Barackstar") captain; Barber shop and beauty salon captain, etc.

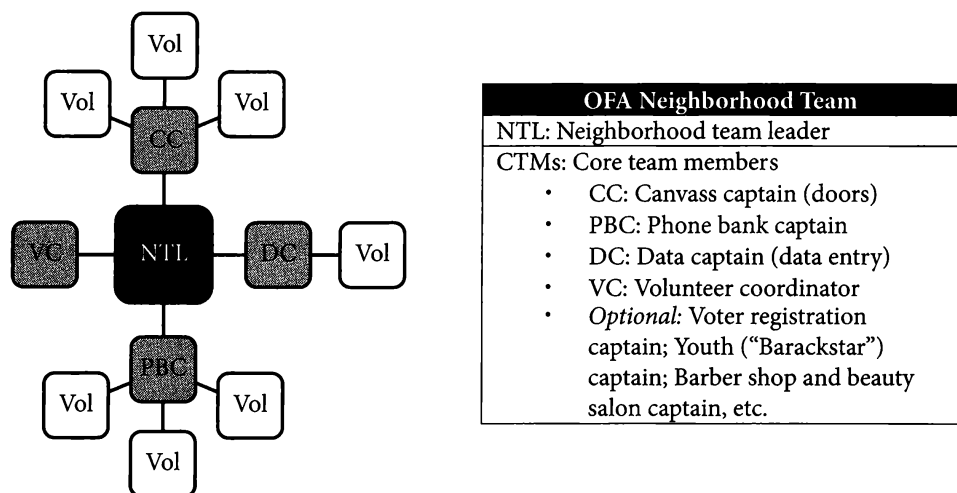FIGURE 5.4: **A fully developed neighborhood team**

In phase four of development, an OFA neighborhood team could count on a leader, 3–4 core team members, and half a dozen or more regular volunteers. While data, canvass, and phone bank captains were a constant presence across teams, other leadership roles, such as congregation or voter registration captains, were recruited as needed according to turf type.

In phase four, the volunteer structure is in place such that each NTL is managing her own team and, in turn, each core team member manages her own subteam. Thus, in Figure 5.4 there is a core team member in charge of volunteer coordination, data, phone banking, and door knocking—and they each have their own sub-volunteer teams as well. The field organizer, not pictured in this diagram, is ideally managing between three and seven NTLs, all of whom have teams like this. Throughout the campaign, layers of leadership and team-building continually grow, so that the capacity of a given field organizer's turf depends on the number of active, functioning teams he or she has organized.

These figures, of course, represent the ideal type. One of the most consistent insights our respondents shared was the need to modify the responsibilities of the core team members depending on the turf type. Greg Jackson, the field director in North Carolina, described it this way:

> While originally there were some cookie-cutter models of "Oh you need a data director, you need a canvass captain, you need phone bank captain, you need a team leader"; we looked at it a little bit differently. So our actual neighborhood teams throughout most of the campaign—every team had a voter registration director, because there was so much voter registration that needed to happen [in North Carolina]....So the voter registration captain was a part of every team just like a canvass captain was. With our neighborhood team leaders, depending on what type of turf they were in, if they were in a turf that was heavy African American or heavy youth, then that was part of their responsibility as well. So while there might not have been a youth captain or an African American outreach captain, neighborhood team leaders were responsible for reaching out to barber shops and beauty shops and connecting with local administration and high schools if that was the type of turf that they were in.

In a 2013 interview, David Axelrod said something similar of the highest-level staff in Chicago: "Everybody understands what instrument they

play and how to blend those instruments," an apt metaphor for the way in which a full-formed neighborhood team functioned at the ground level.[9]

DISTRIBUTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUTCOMES

To make the neighborhood team structure work, OFA also had to "give people the keys to the car and let them drive," as Buffy Wicks said. For top field staff, that meant giving field organizers and volunteers a sense of ownership over the campaign and motivating them to take responsibility for their voter contact metrics. OFA created a culture in which all staff and volunteers had real goals they had to meet, and in which they held those around them to the same standards. As Alex Peña, an organizer in Durango, Colorado, said, "Everybody is trying not to let one another down."

How did the campaign allocate responsibility to volunteer teams? Throughout the campaign, OFA used metrics to distribute responsibility to staff and volunteer teams, providing a clear set of goals teams had to reach. A canvass captain was ultimately responsible for door-to-door activities, but whether or not his team met its goal also depended on the volunteer coordinator to recruit shifts, the phone bankers to confirm the shifts, the volunteers to show up and do the door knocking, the data captain to enter the voter contact numbers at the end of the day, and the neighborhood team leader to oversee the whole operation and report the numbers to the field organizer. Maintaining transparency about goals thus served to distribute leadership throughout the network of field staffers and neighborhood teams across nearly a dozen states. In describing this distribution of responsibility, Cushman said, "It really matters that we could give people *meaningful* goals" (emphasis added).

Many traditional campaigns dole out one-off activities to volunteers. In outsourcing tasks in this way, a volunteer might be asked to call voters for two hours, without being given any insight about who they are calling, what a successful contact rate is, and how many personalized phone calls needed to be made in their neighborhood in order to

execute the campaign's national strategy. The volunteer served as an interchangeable phone banker, responsible for nothing more than sitting in a chair and making calls for a designated period of time. Giving someone responsibility for outcomes, by contrast, is like asking them to recruit 10 new volunteers. Such a responsibility requires the volunteer to use her own skills and resources to try to achieve the outcome by recruiting people to go door-to-door, ensuring that walk packets are prepared, and making contingency plans for inclement weather or difficult-to-access housing complexes. By giving neighborhood teams consequential goals, the Obama campaign increased their sense of responsibility and ownership over the outcomes. In doing so, OFA gave volunteer teams a "subsection" of the campaign, as Lifton-Zoline said.

To distribute responsibility to NTLs and their teams, the staff started first by identifying what consequential goals would be. Working with the analytics team, the field director and deputy field directors of each battleground state, divided the entire state into geographic units, called turf. Then, they calculated the number of votes each turf would need to generate for the campaign to win the entire state. Based on the number of votes needed, they then worked backward to create a plan for the amount of voter contact that would have to happen in each organizer's turf, and, correspondingly, the number of neighborhood teams needed to achieve that voter contact. Allison Zelman, the Pennsylvania field director, described some of the logic behind the goal-setting:

> The [number of] NTLs and CTMs [necessary for a given organizer turf] were by far the easiest just because…we were able to look at the number of MyCampaign people that existed within the turf and we knew we wanted an average of five [teams per FO turf].…We took into account diverse turf, but [figuring that out] was…just part of our turf cutting process. And we also knew how many NTLs we wanted in our state in order to win.

By breaking down goals geographically, the campaign gave each local organizer (and his or her volunteer leaders) an understanding of how

their work could contribute to the larger victory. It broke it down to simple math. As LaCava said, "[I]f your wards go strong Democratic then maybe the city goes Democratic and then maybe the state goes Democratic and then you get those electoral votes for the President."

Field staff, neighborhood team leaders, and core team members were responsible for all the metrics achieved by the people they were managing. Field organizers were responsible for all of the capacity building and voter contact that took place in their turf, regional field directors for their entire region, deputy field directors for their pods (four to eight regions) and field directors for their entire state. For each individual leader to meet her goals, then, she had to support her direct reports in meeting theirs. Holding NTLs accountable for the metrics of their volunteers was another way in which the campaign encouraged leadership development.

Staff thus shared their goals with volunteers to distribute responsibility to them. Attempting over 2,000 households per week in rural turf, for example, could be equivalent to 10 percent of the county's electorate. If limited to staff or stalwart activist production alone, this was an impossible feat. "But," as Jenni Boyle-Smith offered, "when volunteers knew what my goals were, they wanted to help." Her volunteers "wanted to do better, so I did share my goals with [them]." Boyle-Smith understood that the state staff "figured out [our goals] statistically, and then broke that down to field organizer and then I would break it down to teams per night." Bird stressed this point: "You need to have volunteers who know their goals."

Giving teams responsibility for outcomes gave volunteers the sense that they owned a piece of the overall strategy. In Colorado, field director Lifton-Zoline "grounded goals in reality" for his staff. He said, "The people in Chicago are pretty good at this stuff. We think if we do all this work we will win. This is your subsection of it. This is your community. The most empowering other thing we can do is to be clear that no one else is going to do this work, so 'if you're going to do it, do it, and if not we'll get someone else do it'—and we're all doing the same thing."

Anna Cooper, a field organizer in Ohio, remembers that, "there were consequences for not meeting your goals, both as an organizer, and

overall. If you weren't doing the work, then we're not going to win." Cooper, who described herself as "really self-motivated, really hard on myself," said, "If I didn't make goals I would be upset, or just like, 'What could I have done differently?'" Staff and volunteers knew that the goals really mattered. One New Hampshire organizer said, "I think the most important thing was you had to hit your goals, because they didn't make these numbers up just to make our lives hard; maybe these numbers came out of calculations of mass numbers in order for President Obama to win." Bird admitted that OFA "didn't even get all the way where we needed to be" on volunteer ownership of goals. However, the majority of NTLs whom we interviewed were acutely aware of their voter contact production numbers, and how that related to the state and national strategy.

Staci O'Brien first experienced how responsibility was allocated throughout the Obama campaign as a volunteer in Waukesha County, "the reddest county in Wisconsin," she said. A former college English teacher, O'Brien served as an NTL in 2008 and "saw first-hand how much the neighborhood team model empowers local citizens, brings them together, and gives them direction and some tools to make them feel like they're really making a difference." Yet after Obama was declared the winner in 2008, O'Brien said that instead of getting swept up in the inauguration festivities, she was pouring over turnout statistics. "I told myself, 'I am going to trust what [OFA] is telling me but if the day after the election it turns out that it wasn't any different in my little town [as compared to] the surrounding communities, then I'll never do it again, frankly,'" she recounted. O'Brien observed the raw vote total in her town increase by 20 percent, whereas her neighboring county—which had a less robust OFA presence—had turnout increases in the teens. "So, I became a believer," O'Brien said. She became so convinced of the efficacy of the electoral-organizing model that she changed her career path, working to organize 23 counties in Wisconsin during Organizing for America's health care fight in 2010 and 2011, and finally serving as a regional field director on the 2012 campaign.

Because O'Brien had experienced "first-hand" what it felt like to work on a team with "direction," she wanted the organizers and volunteers

she oversaw in 2012 to have the same clarity of purpose. Goals, as we learned from many of our interviews, helped staff and volunteer teams alike understand why their work mattered. "In the run up to the election," O'Brien said, "it was all about building the thing, quite frankly, as big as we could, getting as many volunteers engaged as we could, having as many initial conversations, and collecting as much information as we could—the information would later inform the goals, and the volunteers we were able to recruit would help us achieve those goals." To further contextualize how OFA arrived at the "very high" goals, as she said, O'Brien would tell organizers and volunteers that,

> Number one, it's all going to end at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day, come hell or high water, but number two, you also know you have to get to 50 plus 1 percent, and you know how many votes you need, and you can mathematically calculate how many people you should talk to in order to achieve that goal. I always felt that our goals were very grounded in reality, so I think that's the biggest difference.

Austin Brookley, a field organizer in Florida, also found that providing his volunteers with evidence and context about what the goals meant increased his teams' productivity. OFA, he said, "actually has data to back up their beliefs in [the team structure and goals], which makes it a lot easier to buy into. It's a lot easier to buy into a process when there's evidence to support it. It was a very data-driven campaign," Brookley said, echoing the campaign's secondary mantra: people-focused, metrics-driven.

Even though they did not communicate directly with state and national headquarters, volunteers bore witness to the importance the campaign placed on their work. Blanca O'Leary, the team leader in Colorado, remembers being told "you have to knock on 'X' doors, make 'X' number of phone calls." Ann Cherry, the retired teacher who became a volunteer leader in North Carolina, used similar phrasing: "We had little goals all along. We had the goal for our phone bank—for example, we wanted to hit 'X' number of calls and 'X' number of contacts, which we could see because, especially those of us who were on the evening shift

from seven to nine, and call times stopped at nine, we immediately had to tally so our field organizer could call in on the statewide conference call the number of calls we made, the number of contacts."

Because goals gave people a sense of ownership, some interviewees reported that they could also be a source of motivation. Neighborhood team leader Rick Baer noted parallels between OFA and his former union organizing days. "If you're on an organizing campaign, you have to lead the people, more or less, but they're the ones who have to do it. And if they don't get involved, you're not probably going to win, because they don't really take ownership of the campaign," just like OFA's neighborhood team model, he remarked. Field organizer Clinton Thomas noted how "giving [volunteers] that responsibility, giving them ownership of the campaign, empowering them…made them feel like they owned it more, so they were willing to put in 10, 15, 20 hours a week there at the end."

When volunteer teams had responsibility for meaningful outcomes, they reported being more motivated and committed to the campaign, since they felt ownership over their piece. But goals alone are not the source of motivation; what matters is how they are used. After helping incubate many of the transformative elements of OFA's ground game in 2008, Joy Cushman went on to become a national leader in progressive organizing at the New Organizing Institute and now PICO. She has seen "people try to replicate the [neighborhood] team structure in other instances, where they're just giving people call goals or door knock goals, and it just doesn't work." Metrics thus played a crucial role in coordinating the neighborhood teams because metrics reflected how field responsibilities were both shared and contingent on the work of others.

MORE STAFF, LESS OWNERSHIP?

According to some volunteers, an increase in the number of field staff, particularly in 2012, undercut the campaign's efforts to give volunteers a sense of responsibility for consequential outcomes. This shift underscores the importance of distributing responsibility. To implement its

field strategy, the campaign flooded battleground states with far more staff in 2012. As Bird pointed out, the aggregate number of field staff in 2008 was comparable to that of 2012, but they were concentrated in fewer states. Organizers who might have been deployed to Michigan, Indiana, or Georgia in 2008 were allocated to Ohio. As a result, the staff size in Ohio in 2012 increased by approximately 160 percent as compared to four years prior. In Colorado, field director Lifton-Zoline said that in 2008, the state "had about 100 FOs and…75 or 80 DFOs [deputy field organizers], whereas this time around [in 2012] I think we topped up about 500 people total in the field. So we were [almost] three times the size this time."

This large influx of staff meant that volunteers had fewer responsibilities. Alex Steele was among those 100 FOs from 2008 who witnessed how staff size could alter the field program.[10] Having organized for OFA for years before assuming his post in the state's Denver headquarters in 2012, some of Steele's "old NTLs call me bugging me all the time now about what's going on with OFA." The way in which he had organized in 2008 through the team structure, he said, was the only "way of organizing that has been able to produce that kind [of] loyalty, that buy-in and instilling that sense of greater purpose amongst the volunteers, and they really do feel that passion for their turfs, for their communities." By contrast, in some areas, one of the consequences of the influx of paid organizers in 2012 was that "in some of the more dense, urbanized or very, very dense turfs where it really becomes a little more staff heavy—especially when you have 300 people—you have more of the staff just taking on the responsibilities themselves because they can," Steele said.

Even volunteers in rural areas agreed that the higher concentrations of staff meant volunteers had less responsibility. Jennifer Herrington, a neighborhood team leader from a town of 5,500 in Iowa, contrasted her relationships with her FOs in 2008 and 2012: "In [2008], we had a designated field organizer, and she was very good as far as partnering, and assisting organizing, and just provided a lot of support, and direction." OFA's 2012 presence, according to Herrington, was "much more hands-on, I think, as far as our field organizer, much more intense, more

staff in the last several months leading up to the election, and then a lot more phone banking" as compared to 2008. Sally Gasior, a long-time neighborhood team leader in Ohio, remembers that as more staff came on, she was not the one directly reporting and taking responsibility for her goals. Gasior said, "When I think about being accountable and hitting goals and targets and everything, that was prior to 2012. After that, once they brought in the paid staff, they were the ones doing all that reporting." Katie Keating, a veteran of both election cycles, recalled that the turf she organized by herself in 2008 in Colorado "was divided among five different organizers in 2012. But yet [organizers] still had astronomical goals."

Ellen Gangnon, the long-time neighborhood team leader in Wisconsin, identified a related trade-off: The more hyper-local the field organization, the fewer opportunities there were for coaching, relationship-building, and exchange beyond the handful of precincts to which staff and teams were assigned.[11] As more staff became responsible for increasingly smaller local areas, Gangnon felt her role contract. Before most 2012 field staff arrived in Wisconsin, she had been asked to assume a mentorship role because of her deep understanding of both the OFA model and the neighborhoods in her county. In her capacity as an experienced team leader, she mentored new organizers and new volunteers. "I was able to give some insight," Gangnon said. "It was more of a, 'Well did you know that this is going on or I want to share this, and what do you have to share?'" But, she continued, "when more and more staff came on the ground in our area my contact with the neighborhood team leaders diminished greatly…. It was definitely a shift, it was definitely a shift in my role compared to my issue organizing [OFA 2.0] role. As more and more staff came on board, they then became responsible for the teams."

Assigning only one or two neighborhood teams to each organizer also ran the risk of, as Steele indicated, staff displacing local volunteers in leadership roles. This was a pendulum swing in response to one of OFA's key lessons from 2008: "It was tough for an organizer to manage more than five to seven teams, and give them the kind of support and coaching that it takes, particularly on an accelerated time scale," according to

Grandone, who was part of OFA's 2008 postmortem taskforce. Yet, Grandone also noted, some of the most self-sufficient teams were those that were very rural, and therefore actually had less attention from FOs.

"Ironically," Grandone observed, "some of our strongest teams were where we had one organizer having to cover, in some cases, hundreds of miles of turf because, unlike an organizer in the heart of the city of Milwaukee, where they are right in the center or at the office and people are just coming [through the door], the rural organizers…had no choice because it wasn't humanly possible to be in all these places in the northern part of the state, with all their leaders and at all of their meetings." The premium on finding and empowering the right volunteer leader was thus higher in places where staff had to organize teams that could operate autonomously.

For example, in 2008, one organizer outside of Hayward, Wisconsin, had a "completely unreasonable" amount of turf to cover, Grandone said. The FO recruited a leader who also happened to own a hair salon, which they transformed into a campaign outpost. The organizer outlined what he could do, and how often he could come to Hayward. Realizing that his town was now his responsibility, the volunteer responded that his hair salon would be where they had regular meetings, "because I realize that you're on the road, Mr. Organizer," Grandone recalled the volunteer saying to the staffer. The NTL then conducted his own one-on-ones, leveraged his community contacts to get phones donated, and was forced to learn the VoterFile so his team could input their data in a timely manner. "It was that scenario that forced the organizer and those leaders to actually figure it out," Grandone said.

Thinner staff capacity in 2008 necessitated identifying and empowering a volunteer who could "think strategically and be able to coach others and run an arm of the campaign without an organizer being there as a crutch," Grandone said. Enabling volunteers instead of staff to lead the ground game was, as we have argued, one of the most important components of OFA's field model. Through stories like these, our respondents highlighted the importance of distributing real responsibility to volunteers to make the neighborhood team model work and sustain itself beyond Election Day.

THE TRIBULATIONS OF TURF SPLITTING

More evidence of the importance of giving volunteers responsibility for strategic goals came up when discussing the campaign's commitment to creating hyper-local teams. Giving OFA a presence in every county of every swing state in 2012 meant that each organizer's turf was relatively smaller than it had been in 2008. Patrick Frank, who served as a field organizer in 2008 and regional field director in 2012, noted that "there was sort of an attitude, I think, from HQ, that more is better. And more *was* better, in general—like having more staff was always great—but some things, like, having another field organizer that I now have to give turf to, or getting somebody who doesn't have a car in a suburban turf causes more problems than it's worth."

The campaign would "on board" staff sequentially as they got closer to Election Day, progressively cutting down the size of each organizer's turf as more people were hired. This often strained the relationship between the original field organizer and their volunteers, at times increasing attrition rates. Frank articulates what nearly a dozen interviewees alluded to:

> We had two field organizers in the town of Fort Collins when I started, which is a big place. So by the end we had ten field organizers in Fort Collins. So you can imagine, as the hiring went on, how we kept splitting and we lost NTLs over it. There's no excuse for that. . . . I do think that there could have been more understanding of the situation and the unique relationship that field organizers have with their neighborhood team leaders.

Severing the relationship between early organizers and their volunteers could undermine the relationships that were responsible for the campaign's capacity. Frank noted that OFA "lost some time at the end of July into August taking a team out of a very good field organizer's hands and giving it over to somebody who didn't yet know what they were doing."

Shrinking turf sizes also meant that the pool of potential volunteer recruits per team diminished, making it harder for some organizers and

leaders to build their teams. Jenni Boyle-Smith, the Ohio field organizer, said that the number of teams she was charged with building in her rural turf was "really ambitious up front. When I came in, they were like 'you are going to have 5 teams.' I was like, 'I don't have enough people to have 5 teams!'" As Election Day neared, Boyle-Smith was given permission to consolidate. "And once we [narrowed] it down to three, the neighborhood model worked perfectly," she said.

In addition, because of the pressure to build teams in ever-smaller numbers of precincts, some staff and volunteers were tasked with building teams in areas that were simply not "walkable," as the campaign described them. In very rural turf, it could take four hours to canvass only 15 houses, and speak to a handful of voters. When looking only at the numbers of teams and the geographic coordinates of staging locations, this meant that OFA was achieving its goal of hyper-locality. From the perspective of the volunteers, however, their time was being wasted. One regional field director said,

> [Headquarters] kept changing our goals and telling us that we were gonna build more teams, but at some point we knew this was what we had, so we started figuring out how to make it work like that, still looking for people, but I think you should always have a backup plan. So for us it was teams covering bigger areas, moving some people from suburban areas. We had one whole team that we told [headquarters] that their whole turf was unwalkable, but nobody believed us until the very end, and we just moved that whole team into another area, because their whole turf was unwalkable. They didn't need a staging location out there.

Where organizers could not find volunteers to fill roles on their neighborhood teams or in staging locations, they fell back on tactics that field campaigns had used in past campaigns. "We had some people from New York who came in and helped," the RFD said. "I had fellows that I moved [into staging location roles] from different areas. What ended up happening in a lot of areas is it looked like I told them it was gonna look before [headquarters] kept pushing me to make [the teams] smaller."

Bird agreed that turf splitting and staff handoffs were one of OFA's greatest challenges. "The whole turf breaking up, we probably struggled with that the most, because you never know how much money you were going to have for staff, so it's not like at the beginning I was able to say, 'Chris [Wyant, the Ohio general election director], you're going to have 700 staff, and here's when you're going to get them.'" Chicago never knew precisely how much money they would raise each quarter, so Bird could only tell field directors that "you're going to be able to get 250 [organizers] by X date, and if fundraising keeps going [you'll] get another." As mentioned in chapter 3, Bird and other top operatives in Chicago knew that *Citizens United* would change the game, and that the Republicans would spend a lot of money early on. "We were freaked out about it, so it was always a fight over how much money we got to put into the field program," Bird said. He was careful to add, however, that within OFA "it wasn't like the paid media people were trying to take all of our money. They were trying to do their job; we were trying to do ours."

Ultimately, the Obama campaign raised nearly $260 million in the final months of the campaign, a sum that allowed for a last-minute surge of field staff hires. As a result, states brought on full-time organizers through August and September, according to the field directors we interviewed. "We always would take more field staff," Jackson laughed. "I just think, and this is not just the case in North Carolina, but I think more staff earlier would have allowed us to be a lot stronger.... So I think most importantly if I were to do something differently for 2016 I think it would be to take a little bit more time to be there in the state and to make sure that the entire grassroots movement is growing a little bit faster than it was."

THE NEIGHBORHOOD TEAM: A VEHICLE FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

The challenges of turf splitting and balancing staff and volunteer responsibility arose only because OFA sought to empower its volunteers in the first place. In contrast to most campaigns that did not give volunteers real responsibility, or ask them to work collectively with each other, OFA wanted volunteers to work with each other to produce real

work for the campaign. In OFA, the volunteer leaders took so much responsibility for campaign outcomes, that some veteran volunteers were the ones training new staff who joined the campaign. As Frank recalls, the volunteers would sometimes groan about having to manage up to the paid staffers. "[There was a time] right around August, where we'd introduce a new staffer and every [volunteer] NTL in the room would groan and go, 'Oh, God, who has to take the new guy?'" OFA had cultivated so much capacity among some volunteers that they were the ones who assumed responsibility for teaching the electoral-organizing model to the staffers.

The neighborhood team structure was central to OFA's program of developing capacity among volunteers. Through the team structure, volunteers and staff formed relationships with each other that became the basis of their commitment. The team became a vehicle for collective action. It served to coordinate the work of volunteers, while still holding them accountable to the outcomes the campaign cared about. OFA's highly disciplined and rigidly structured field hierarchy was, in other words, more than just that. Its strength still depended on meaningful human relationships, and an investment in the development of both the staff and volunteers.

It bears repeating that OFA's organizing practices were not in themselves revolutionary. Building relationships with constituents through one-on-one, direct conversations and entrusting those constituents with responsibility is exactly what Obama himself did on the South Side of Chicago in the 1980s, in the same way that countless other social movements, labor unions, and civic associations build power with communities. However, the tactics were unusual in their application (on two national presidential campaigns) and also for their scale: all told, the 2012 Obama campaign reports that it had over 4,000 people on its field staff payroll, over 10,000 neighborhood teams, and more than 30,000 core team members who produced over 400,000 manpower hours per week for the campaign.