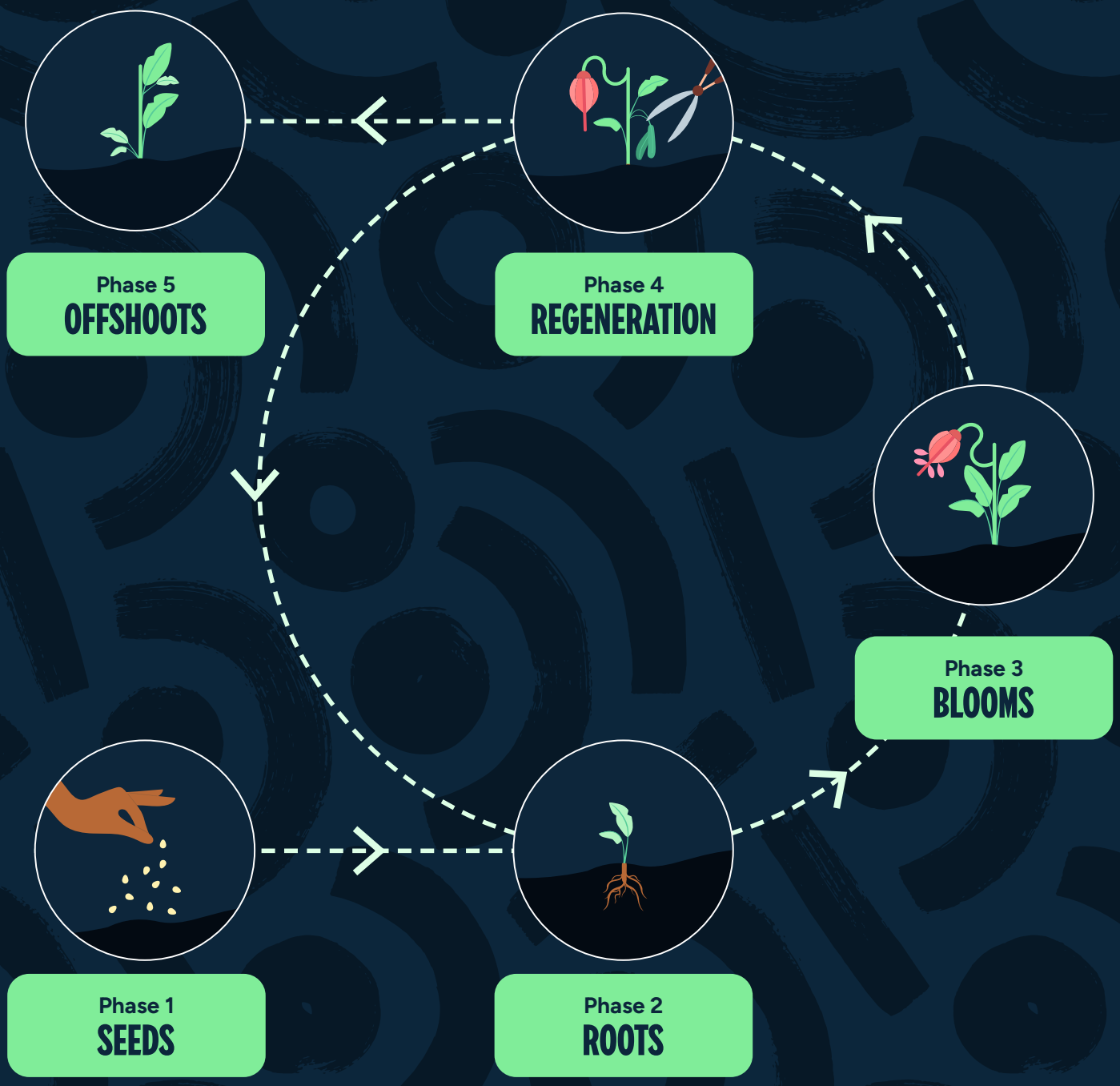
THE PHASES AND NUTRIENTS OF ORGANIZER GROWTH

For two years, the Organizer Learning Project engaged with over 75 organizers from across the country to explore the joyful, rigorous, and, at times, heartbreaking process of becoming an organizer.

Their stories illuminated not just how and what they learned, but also their evolution and growth throughout their organizing careers and the relationships and experiences that shaped them and kept them in the field. Taken together, the Phases and Nutrients of Organizer Growth point to opportunities for intervention and investment to nurture and strengthen organizers.

PHASES OF ORGANIZER GROWTH

The five Phases of Organizer Growth illustrate the evolving, cyclical, and dynamic nature of organizer development. Organizers' stories and experiences demonstrate that there is universality to organizer growth, no matter their context or organizing tradition.



Phase 1

SEEDS

This phase is an entry-point where a future organizer first sees the value and potential of organizing. For many organizers, their "Seeds" are first-hand experiences of a collective action or organizing effort where they witness the power of organizing and choose to pursue an organizing career.

Seeing what people power looks like, what strength in numbers means, was really eye-opening for me. I remember seeing hundreds and hundreds of people outside City Hall... And seeing what solidarity looked like, I still remember to this day, it was such an inspiring moment for me as a young person."

Phase 2

ROOTS

In this phase, organizers lay the groundwork for their career. Through trainings, on-the-ground experiences, and one-to-one coaching and mentoring, organizers learn the day-to-day work and skills and build relationships with community members, peers, and leaders. The learning curve is steep, and organizers describe their experience of this phase as "drinking out of a fire hose."

...My first supervisor handed me this manual and was like, 'Read the whole thing and then go find 10 people to talk to about what they care about in the community.' I was 21 and I was so scared...That's how I learned how to organize. He pushed me into the deep end of the pool and was like, 'Have 10 conversations and then call me...And we're gonna talk about what it means to be an organizer in the context of those conversations.' "

Phase 3

BLOOMS

Organizers thrive in the Blooms phase. They have a deep well of skills, relationships, and experiences and approach organizing with increased autonomy and confidence. Organizers are honing their approach, stepping into new leadership, and developing and training others. In the Blooms phase, organizers know—and have experienced—what it takes to build and wield power.

This was at the height of my career when I had started to really move things that felt more aligned with what I wanted to do. It was during that time that I was able to really hone how I would move leaders and develop them around something that they really cared about. This is the point at which I learned a lot about myself and organizing and perfecting the craft.

PHASE 4

REGENERATION

This phase is a pivot point for organizers when they experience a disturbance in their career and are unsure about their future in organizing. Organizers describe feeling bored, directionless, or burnt out in this phase. These feelings may be catalyzed by a specific event or an emerging awakening or observation about the field or themselves that has grown over time.

Some organizers leave the field at this point, while others come through this phase recommitted to organizing. Those who recommitted had experiences that gave them a new perspective, inspired them, and reminded them why they love organizing.

"I went for 14 months and worked as the lead organizer. Being away from everything familiar helped me to just remember myself and remember the essentials of this work...I needed to step out of my context and see myself and the work differently. And the fact that I had people who had more experience than I did and had some imagination for me, was really critical. That was a pivotal moment for me."

PHASE 5

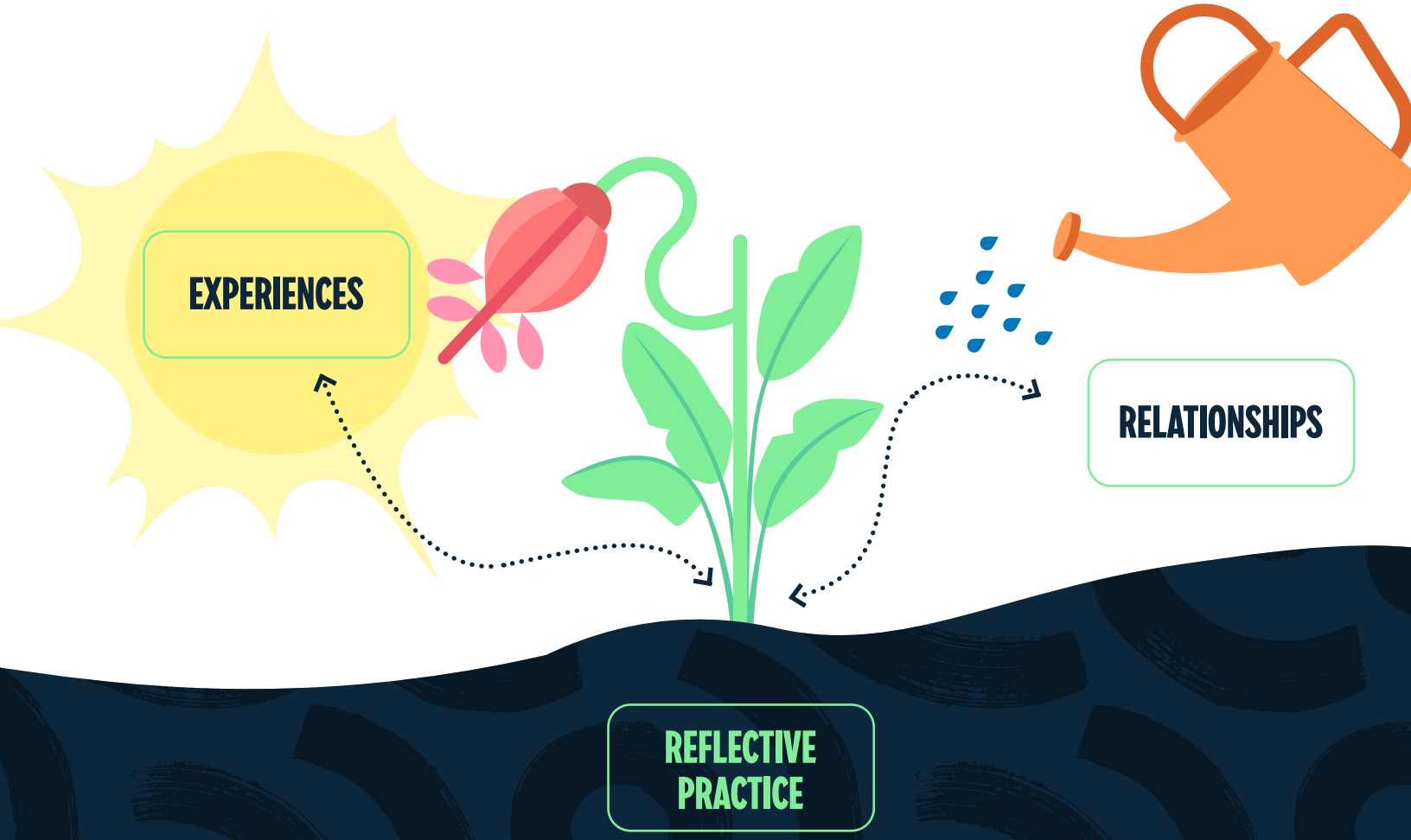
OFFSHOOTS

Organizers in this phase move away or fully step back from the day-to-day practice of organizing. Some organizers have reached the end of their careers and are ready to retire. Others remain committed to organizing, but shift to supportive positions where they provide mentoring, training, funding, research, consulting, and thought leadership to the organizing field.

Some organizers at this phase take on the notable role of a "sage." A sage is one who has attained insight and wisdom through their organizing experience, and who others look to for guidance, advice, encouragement, and support.

THE NUTRIENTS OF ORGANIZER GROWTH

Like plants that need sunlight, water, and healthy soil to grow and flourish, experiences and relationships are the essential nutrients that propel organizers through the phases and support them to learn about the discipline, themselves, and the world around them. Experiences and relationships support, challenge, strengthen, and guide organizers.



EXPERIENCES

Training: Learning Organizing Skills and Concepts

Structured training is often an organizer's first formal experience learning the discipline of organizing, but it also can serve as a means for ongoing skills and capacity building throughout an organizer's career. "The trainings...have been really essential in learning the craft."

Shadowing: Seeing Organizing in Action

Shadowing is when an organizer observes another organizer put organizing principles into action. "When I started organizing, I wasn't really sure what I was doing, right? For me, it was really important to see people that I thought were experts doing the work and showing me the possibilities. It helped inform my style of organizing."

Doing: Practicing and Developing the Discipline

Direct, hands-on experiential learning is often at the heart of organizer development. It is when organizers apply what has been learned and observed, put it into practice, and make it one's own. "We learn by doing, right? Many of us learned by taking action and getting involved."

Sensing: Reading and Translating the External Context

Through formal and informal methods, such as deep listening and one-to-ones, organizers continuously engage with communities to learn their stories, history, culture, strengths, pain, needs, and priorities. Sensing is a type of intuitive learning in which organizers learn to "have an ear to the ground," assess the context and community's energy, and translate it into strategies and campaigns to advance community priorities.

Journeying: Having New Organizing Experiences to Reset and Reinspire

Organizers can experience episodic or sustained moments of doubt, boredom, or inertia in their organizing career. At those points, organizers described the value of stepping out of their organizing job for a period of time to experience a new type of organizing, like labor or electoral organizing, or to experience organizing in a new community or context for an extended period.

"You can't stay in the same organization, same location for a long time and grow as rapidly as you can. In Greek mythology, people would hear the call to the sea, an adventure, and they don't know whether they can do the thing. And then they go out and then they do the thing and then they come back transformed. People need those experiences."

RELATIONSHIPS

Supervisors: Providing Guidance and Tools

Supervisors are senior or lead organizers, organizing directors, or executive directors who provide regular oversight and professional guidance on organizing skills, strategies, campaigns, and goals. "The unique contribution of supervisors is that these folks get to see you on a regular basis, so they start to really understand your strengths and call those out, as well as start to see the patterns of weaknesses."

Mentors and Coaches: Supporting Holistic Growth

Mentors and coaches are often individuals outside of the organizer's organization who do not have a formal oversight role of the organizer but play an influential role in organizers' personal and professional growth. Mentors help organizers forge their own path as an organizer, reminding them to care for themselves and helping them answer the "bigger questions" about their place in the field and in their community.

Peers: Facilitating Truth-telling and Accountability

Peers are in a similar phase of their development which allows organizers to "think together" and share in the struggles, challenges, and victories. "I feel like peers are very helpful in signaling and letting you know to trust your gut and it feels easier to gut check with peers than it does sometimes with the supervisors and mentors."

Community Leaders and Members: Ground-Truthing

Community members humanize the work and make it real. They are an external reality check that cuts through intellectualization and professionalization. "I listen a lot to what the community has to say because they show up as leaders in many ways and make me feel grounded."

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE:

Where Relationships and Experiences Come Together

Organizer growth is nurtured at the intersection of relationships and experiences. Powerful learning happens when experiences and relationships come together in moments of formal and informal reflection with mentors, peers, community members, or supervisors. Reflection enables organizers to metabolize their experiences and extract lessons.

When navigating experiences alone, organizers expressed feelings of doubt, isolation, and loneliness. However, when organizers were provided the space and relationships to reflect on these experiences in connection with others, it fostered learning, growth, and confidence.