

Understanding Self-Interest
The Importance of Relationships
How Direct Action Differs from Other Types of Organizing
The Three Principles of Direct Action
How a Direct Action Organizing Issue Campaign Works
The Use of Power in an Issue Campaign
A Tactical Guide to Power
The Stages of an Issue Campaign
Tricks the Other Side Uses

How many times have you heard an organizer say something like “People around here are so apathetic, no one wants to do anything.” Yet if you walk around the block, you will find that everyone is out industriously doing what they need to do. Most are hard at work or going to school. A few are searching for deposit cans or hustling. Hardly any are apathetically sitting around waiting for good things to come to them. If organizers encounter people who seem apathetic, it is because we haven’t been able to convince them that organizing is one way to get what they need. In fact, we usually don’t know what they need because we don’t understand their self-interest. For that reason, this chapter on the fundamentals of organizing starts with a discussion of self-interest.

Understanding Self-Interest

An underlying assumption behind direct action organizing is that you, the leader or organizer, are working with people who are primarily motivated by self-interest. That is, they are making the effort to organize in order to get something out of it for themselves, their families, or their community. The concept of self-interest also includes motivation by a sense of moral justice or by an ideology that

The Fundamentals of Direct Action Organizing

leads people to want to help the poor or to seek opportunities to fight racism, curb the power of transnational corporations, or protect the environment, among many other things.

Self-interest is one of the most important and misunderstood concepts in direct action organizing. It is sometimes thought of in the most narrow sense: people want more “stuff” and will organize to get it (often to get it away from someone else). But self-interest is actually a much broader concept. The word “interest” comes from the Latin *inter esse*, which means “to be among.” (There is a similar word in Spanish.) So, self-interest is self among others. That is, where do my needs fit into those of the larger society?

The concept of self-interest applies to an individual’s material needs, such as better housing, education, healthcare, or wages, but it also applies to the need for friends, for respect, for recognition, for being useful, for feeling important, or for feeling part of a larger community. Self-interest generalized is often class interest. Self-interest can mean the good feeling that comes from getting back at the landlord, standing up to the boss, or knocking an unaccountable politician out of office. Self-interest also applies across generational lines as people are motivated to fight for what helps their children or grand-

children. Self-interest, then, applies to what makes people feel good about themselves, as well as to what materially benefits them.

More broadly still, many people feel a need to take on the responsibilities of citizenship and to play a role in shaping public affairs. People want interaction with the larger community and often enjoy working collectively for the common good. Sometimes self-interest is a desire to work with people of a different race or culture in order to broaden one’s own perspective or to combat prejudice. Other people may be drawn to an international project, such as fighting foreign sweatshops, because they want to make a global difference.

The point here is not to make a list of all the forms of self-interest and particularly not to imply that all of them apply to everyone. As an organizer, you can assume *nothing* about a person’s self-interest that isn’t actually expressed to you by that person. One of the worst mistakes an organizer can make is to say, “This is an issue about which everyone must care” or “This is an issue about which you must care because you are a _____ (vegetarian, ballet dancer—fill in the blank).” It is risky enough to act on what the polls tell you people care about. Caring is one thing; acting on it is quite another. Understanding self-interest is the

key to getting people to take that step. Listening is an essential way for an organizer to learn what people's self-interest truly is. One-on-one interviews are an excellent way to get to know the values and concerns that motivate people. However you do it, organizing is the process of finding out what people want as individuals and then helping them find *collective* ways of getting it.

The Importance of Relationships

The personal is political: Organizing is overwhelmingly about personal relationships. It is about changing the world and changing how individuals act together. The relationships organizers develop are their most important resource and forming relationships their most important talent. To form good relationships, an organizer must like people. A good organizer is motivated by strong feelings of love and caring. This should not be forgotten because a good organizer is motivated as well by strong feelings of outrage and anger at how people are treated. Forming relationships with people is based on trust and respect. It is based on doing what you commit to do and being honest and straightforward in order to advance the members' goals through building an organization.

One's ability to build relationships reflects one's basic values. In the long term, you will be known by your values. Characteristics that will enable you to build strong relationships include

- Caring about others. People around you can tell if you really care about them or just view them as a means to do your job.
- Treating everyone respectfully, regardless of status or lack thereof. Those who are gracious only to the powerful will be noticed.
- Judging not. ("Judge not that ye be not judged.") Give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Try to understand why people act cer-

tain ways. Develop a reputation as someone who refuses to talk negatively about other people and other organizations. (It's OK to talk negatively about the target of your campaign; in fact, it's necessary.)

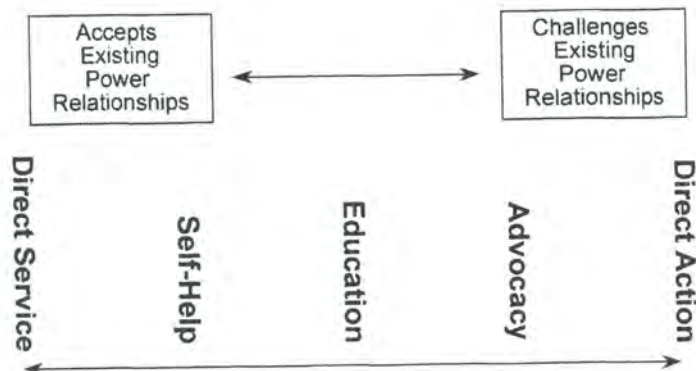
Relationships between organization members are also critical. The long-term lesson that successful direct action and Labor organizing teaches is that everyday people can make their own decisions, manage their own organizations, and rely on each other to work for the common good and that they can do it across lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. This is just the opposite of the view that we must all be guided by the economic and intellectual elite. All too often, a bad organizational experience reinforces the wrong lesson. Anyone who sets out to organize others should remember that the political implications go far beyond the immediate issues.

All organizing, then, is based on relationships and self-interest, broadly defined. With this foundation, we will proceed to the ways in which direct action organizing differs from other forms because not only is the personal political, the political is also political.

How Direct Action Differs from Other Types of Organizing

Different types of organizations are like different tools. Each tool is best suited to a particular task, although sometimes more than one tool will do the job. The main types of citizen organizations are shown in the chart:

The Forms of Community Organizing



Here is an illustration of the differences using the example of unaffordable prescription drugs. People who can't afford prescription drugs could get them in many ways.

Direct Service. A service organization such as a senior organization could provide discounts to its members by buying in bulk.

Self-Help. People who need the drugs could form their own buying cooperatives to get lower prices.

Education. An education organization could do a study of the cost of prescription drugs or the lack of insurance coverage. A different type of education organization might prepare materials on how to find the lowest cost sources.

Advocacy. An organization might advocate for people who need prescription drugs—victims of a specific disease, for example—by giving testimony about the problem to a committee of Congress or the CEO of a pharmaceutical company. The people who need the prescription drugs might or might not know that an advocacy organization is doing this.

Public Interest. A public interest organization might go beyond advocacy and actually write the legislation for a state or national drug insurance plan that the group would attempt to get passed.

Neither the advocacy organization nor the public interest organization is necessarily made up of the people who actually have the problem, but it works on their behalf.

Direct Action. The people with the problem organize. They agree on a solution that meets their needs and, with the strength of their numbers, pressure the politicians and officials responsible. The people directly affected by the problem take action to solve it.

As the chart indicates, the forms of organizing on the left-hand side tend to accept existing power relationships as they are. The forms further to the right-hand side challenge power relationships.

The Three Principles of Direct Action

Direct action organizing is based on three principles that give it its character and distinguish it from other forms. These three principles will be referred to throughout the manual.

Win Real, Immediate, Concrete Improvements in People's Lives

Whether the improvement is better health-care, lower auto insurance rates, street lighting, or police protection, the direct action organization attempts to win it for large numbers of people. Even when the problem being addressed is very large or long term—crime, unemployment, discrimination, or world hunger, for example—it must be broken down into short-term, attainable goals, called issues. Without winnable issue goals, there is no reality principle, no way to measure success. If the goal of an

organization is educating people, changing the framework of their thinking, or working only for very long-term goals, there is rarely a way to measure progress or even to determine if it is relevant at all. How many people had their thinking changed and by how much? How do you know?

Give People a Sense of Their Own Power

Direct action organizations mobilize the power that people have. In doing so, they teach the value of united action through real-life examples, and they build the self-confidence of both the organization and the individuals in it. Direct action organizations avoid shortcuts that don't build people's power, such as bringing in a lawyer to handle the problem, asking a friendly politician to take care of it, or turning it over to a government agency. Giving people a sense of their own power is as much a part of the organizing goal as is solving the problem.

Alter the Relations of Power

Building a strong, lasting, and staffed organization alters the relations of power. Once such an organization exists, people on the "other side" must always consider the organization when making decisions. When the organization is strong enough, it will have to be consulted about decisions that affect its members. The organization further strives to alter power relations by passing laws and regulations that give it power and by putting into public office its own people or close allies (although groups to which contributions are tax deductible are prevented by law from endorsing candidates). Winning on issues is never enough. The organization itself must be built up so that it can take on larger issues and play a political role.

Community and citizen organizations are democratic institutions; their very existence helps to make the whole system work better and

opens avenues for ongoing participation. Without such democratic institutions, our concept of politics would be limited to voting every few years, a necessary but often uninspiring activity.

Building an organization is not a natural byproduct of good programs. Groups cannot assume that their organization will grow if they just win on issues. There is a difference between mobilizing people during a campaign and actually organizing them into an ongoing structure for which they take responsibility. Concrete plans must be made and steps taken to assure that the organization grows (e.g., money is raised and members are recruited and retained). This point is particularly important in light of the growing use of e-mail mobilization.

The question of the importance of direct service work, such as feeding the homeless or caring for the aged, comes up repeatedly when direct action organizing is discussed. Often the point of an issue campaign is to win just such programs. In general, we do not recommend combining service delivery with direct action in the same organization. Funding for the service often must come from sources such as a Mayor or County Executive, who are targets of direct action campaigns on issues that may be unrelated to the funding. The officials then use withdrawal of the funding as a threat against the organization, and it may well be lost. Often in such organizations, a split develops between those who see the service aspect as most important (or whose jobs depend on it) and those who see the direct action part of the program as being most important. Both are needed but not as functions of the same group.

How a Direct Action Organizing Issue Campaign Works

In organizing, the word "campaign" has many meanings. An *issue campaign* is waged to win a

victory on a particular issue. It is different from an election campaign, which might happen to be fought on issues. It is also different from an education campaign to raise public awareness, a fundraising campaign to support a cause, or a service delivery campaign such as providing the homeless with shelter. An issue campaign ends in a specific victory. People get something they didn't have before. Someone with power agrees to do something that he or she previously refused to do. Implied in the word "campaign" is a series of connected events over a period of time, each of which builds the strength of the organization and brings it closer to victory. Few organizations are strong enough to win a major demand just by asking.

When used in organizing, the word "issue" has meaning that is different from everyday usage. *An issue is a specific solution to a problem.* For example, passing a law requiring sewage treatment is one solution to the problem of water pollution. The law is the issue. The distinction between the problem (what is wrong) and the issue (a solution to the problem) is made to keep the group focused on winning something and not merely expounding upon the problem. An issue campaign has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is seldom a one-shot event, nor is it simply a series of events linked by a common theme. It is a method of building power and building organization.

The Use of Power in an Issue Campaign

Power generally consists of having a lot of money or a lot of people. Citizen organizations tend to have people, not money. Thus, our ability to win depends on our being able to do with people what the other side is able to do with money. For citizen organizations, power usually takes one of three forms:

1. *You Can Deprive the Other Side of Something It Wants.* Examples: A public official is directly or indirectly deprived of votes. A corporate executive is deprived of a promotion because you cost the company money when you forced a regulatory agency to come into the picture. A landlord is deprived of rent because of a rent strike. A city department head is deprived of a job when you show him or her to be incompetent. Conflict of interest is exposed, and corrupt people are deprived of the ability to do business as usual—or better, sent to jail.
2. *You Can Give the Other Side Something It Wants.* Examples: Senior citizens sign pledges to use a hospital that accepts Medicare assignment as payment in full. Your organization's approval counts with key groups of voters. Your voter registration work creates a base of support for specific issues or candidates.
3. *Your Organization Can Elect Someone Who Supports Your Issues.*

Often, having power means that your organization finds a way to stand on someone's foot until you are paid (by being given what you want) to go away. This isn't a shakedown, nor do we enjoy treating people in such a fashion. But the targets of these tactics are people who have shown a serious disregard for our well-being—or worse, are doing us actual harm.

Of course, a real-life issue campaign doesn't start out with high-pressure activities. It starts out with reasonable people asking nicely for things to which they feel entitled. Efforts are made to persuade on the merits, facts, and morality of the issue. It is after people are refused things, for which they shouldn't even have had to ask in the first place, that power must be applied.

A Tactical Guide to Power

While consulting with many groups over the years, we on the Midwest Academy staff have often heard organizers make shaky assumptions about the power of their own organizations. "We have people power." "We have consumer power." "The law is on our side." Such assumptions are made on the basis of principles that are true in general but that may not hold up when applied to a particular situation. Here are some brief guidelines for measuring the power that you actually have.

Political/Legislative Power: Getting Something Passed by an Elected Body

Many local groups work to pressure unelected government, administrators, or regulators to do what is needed. Their success depends, in large part, on how such people perceive the group's ability to bypass them and take the case directly to the elected officials who appoint them. It also depends on their estimation of the organization's ability to directly or indirectly influence the outcome of elections.

What matters:

- *Primarily:* Voters, especially those who care strongly enough about an issue to vote for candidates on the basis of their position on that issue.
- *Secondarily:* Money that can influence votes. Media that can influence votes.
- *Timing:* Most effective prior to an election.
- *Key Questions to Ask:*

Regarding the legislative body as a whole:

- Is the decision made in committee or by the leadership or on the floor?
- If the decision is made by leadership, how strong are you in their home districts, are they seeking to run for higher office, and will they someday need votes in areas where you are strong?

- If the decision is not made by leadership but by a vote, then you need half plus one of the voting members. Count up how many are firmly with you and how many will never support you. Look at who is left. Are there enough voting members for a majority? Where do they come from? Can you influence them?
- Do term limits apply? How many people can't run again in the next election? (It is difficult to influence legislators who aren't running for re-election; that is why term limits is a profoundly antidemocratic idea. Increasingly, legislators simply run for the other house when limits are applied.)

Regarding a single elected official

- How close was the last election?
- Is this seat usually contested?
- What is the number of supporters you have in the district?
- Are there organizations that might cooperate?
- Whom can you get to lobby the elected official from among
 - Key contributors
 - Leaders of primary voting blocks
 - Religious and opinion leaders
 - Party leadership

Consumer Power: The Ability to Conduct a Boycott

What matters:

- *Primarily:* Cutting profits or demonstrating ability to cut profits by changing consumer choices.
- *Secondarily:* Media coverage that could influence purchasing.
- *Timing:* Most effective during times of stress for a company, such as during a merger, a strike, or tight financial times.
- *Key Questions to Ask:*
 - What is the company's profit margin?

- Is the company's market local, regional, national, or international?
- Who, or what, really owns the company?
- Can you really hurt profits?

Legal/Regulatory Power: The Ability to Win in Court or in a Regulatory Process

What matters:

- *Primarily:* Clear laws and tight regulations.
- *Secondarily:* Money for lawyers, volunteer lawyers, or the ability to get a public agency to carry the case for you. Media to make it a political issue.
- *Timing:* Must be prepared to carry on for several years. Sometimes you do this to delay and actually want the process to last many years.
- *Key Questions to Ask:*
 - Are laws or regulations clearly on your side?
 - Have similar cases been won elsewhere?
 - What are the politics of the judges or regulators who will hear the case? Who appointed them?
 - What are the extra costs (e.g., fees for experts or duplicating thousand-page transcripts)? Who pays?

Strike/Disruptive Power

What matters:

- *Primarily:* Cutting profits or income by stopping a company or agency from functioning.
- *Timing:* Most effective during times of stress for a company or agency. such as during a merger, boycott, or tight financial times.
- *Key Questions to Ask:*
 - What is the company's profit margin?
 - Can you make a significant dent by stopping work (strikes) or disrupting work or customers (usually by civil disobedience)? How costly will it be to replace you or get rid of you?

- Do you have a strike fund sufficient to outlast the company by one day?
- Do you have people willing to get arrested and money to bail them out ?

Illusions about Power

All too often, groups believe that they will win because

- They are morally right.
- Truth is on their side.
- They have the best information and it is all spelled correctly.
- They speak for large numbers of people.

Of course we need all of these working in our favor, but very often our opponents who have none of them win anyway. What matters is the ability to bring direct pressure on decision makers. When we claim to speak for large numbers, we need to show that we can mobilize those people and that they respond to us through rallies and demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and their ballots. At the same time, we need to avoid another common misconception about power, which is that everyday people can never gain power over special interests and large corporations. Underestimating our power is as bad as overestimating it. It is true that the larger battle to secure economic justice and to end exploitation will take the mobilization of forces that cannot even be conceived of today. Nonetheless, we can and do win smaller issues when we mobilize what power we now have.

The Stages of an Issue Campaign

Power is built through issue campaigns. Campaigns last for various lengths of time, and an organization can, by carefully choosing its

issue, influence the length of its campaigns. Frequently, new organizations want short campaigns and sometimes choose relatively "fixed fights" for their first issues. They ask for information that they know they are entitled to, or they ask for something to be done that probably would have been done anyway but at a later date. The purpose of the fight is to have a visible win. These quick victories build up the members' confidence in their ability to accomplish something and also gain public recognition for the new organization. Later, longer campaigns, say, of six months' duration, provide an opportunity to recruit volunteers, build a committee structure, or give the organization's leadership experience. Issue campaigns may be timed either to coincide with elections or to avoid them.

Both long and short issue campaigns go through a series of steps, although shorter campaigns involve fewer tactics than described below.

1. *Choose the Issue and Develop a Strategy.* The people who have a problem agree on a solution and how to get it. They may decide to define, or "cut," the issue narrowly: "Make our landlord give us back our rent deposits when we move out." Or they may define it more broadly: "Make the City Council pass a law requiring the return of rent deposits." The strategy is the overall plan for winning the issue, building the organization, and changing the relations of power. A strategy is always about a power equation. It is how you assess the strengths and weaknesses of the target/decision maker. (See chapter 4.)
2. *Open Communication with the Target.* Next, communications are opened with the person who has the power to give the group what it wants. Requests are made and arguments are presented. At this point, the problem is sometimes resolved and the organization's requests

are met. When they are not resolved, however, the person with the power becomes the "target" of an issue campaign. The target, or "decision maker," is always the person who has the power to give you what you want. (If no one has such power, then you haven't cut the issue correctly.)

A decision maker is always a person. It is never an institution such as the government, the corporation, the bank, the legislature, the board, or the agency. Break it down. Even the most powerful institutions are made up of people. Having already addressed the institution itself through official channels, the campaign now moves outside that framework to focus pressure on one or more individuals who make up the institution and have the power to give you what you want. These people are actually the institution's weak point. As individuals, they have goals, aspirations, and interests that don't coincide completely with those of the institution. For example, the state insurance commission may be set up to support the industry, but the commissioner may hope to run for Governor someday and thus want to establish the appearance of independence.

3. *Announce the Campaign.* Frequently, a media event announces the start of the campaign. A study may be released, or people may simply tell of their experiences and their efforts to correct the problem. If the campaign is to be a coalition effort, then most of the coalition's member organizations need to sign on to the campaign before the announcement and be present at the event.

(Note: A coalition is an organization of organizations. The Coalition for Interspecies Relationships does not become a true coalition

because one member owns a hamster and another a turtle. Even if the members *are* hamsters and turtles, this is still not a true coalition. Only if the coalition is made up of *organizations* of hamsters and turtles, or *organizations* of their owners, is it a real coalition.)

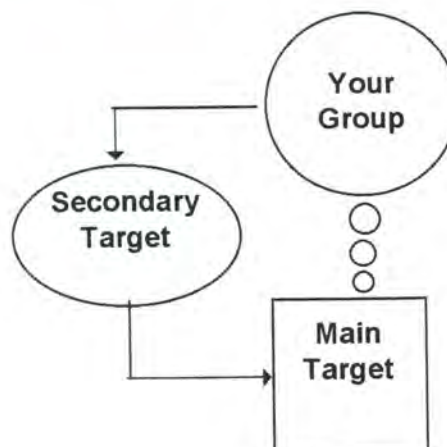
4. *Begin Outreach Activities.* Because every campaign is an opportunity to reach new people, outreach activities are started now. In a statewide or national campaign, other organizations may be enlisted. When the organization has a local focus, individuals and local groups are brought in. Often a petition drive is used both to find supporters and to build a group of active volunteers who circulate the petition. Speakers may be sent out to meetings of groups such as senior clubs, unions, churches, or PTAs (Parent-Teacher Associations). The kickoff of each of these activities can be a press event in itself, at least in smaller cities where press is easier to get.

The outreach drive builds toward a large turnout event such as a public hearing sponsored by the organization. The event establishes legitimacy and brings in more allies and volunteers. It is also fun and a media event.

5. *Stage Direct Encounters with Decision Makers.* Now the organization is ready for direct encounters with the people who have the power to give it what it wants. Large face-to-face meetings (sometimes called "actions") are set up with the decision maker. At this stage, the organization members carefully consider what power the organization has over the decision maker. It usually has more power over elected officials than over appointed ones, and it usually has more power over anyone in government than in private

corporations, unless the corporations are heavily dependent on local customers.

Although several months may have passed, it is still early in the campaign, and the group is probably too weak to challenge its main decision-maker directly. Attention thus shifts to "secondary targets." These are people over whom the organization has more power than it has over the main target. In turn, the secondary target has more power over the main target than does the organization. For example, the Mayor might be the main target and the local ward leader the secondary target. Because the organization's members are a large percentage of the voters in the ward leader's district but only a small percentage of the voters in a citywide election, the organization usually has more power over the locally elected official than over the one elected citywide. And because the local official helps to get the Mayor elected, she has more influence at City Hall than does the group. The organization therefore puts pressure on the ward leader to get her to pressure the Mayor to meet the group's demands. (The terminology of organizing is often confusing on this point. The "secondary target" is not the same as the second target, the person to whom you would go second when you are done seeing the person to whom you went



first. A better term for secondary target might be “indirect target”—that is, a person to whom you go to put pressure on someone else indirectly.)

6. *Build the Organization.* A series of meetings with secondary targets builds support for the issue. Each meeting is an opportunity to recruit new supporters, train spokespersons, and try for media coverage. Such meetings are also fun. To demonstrate power, an elected official might be shown more signatures on petitions than the number of votes by which she won in the last election. The Director of a local Housing Authority might be told that he is in violation of HUD (Housing and Urban Development) regulations or local building codes and that outside agencies will be called in to investigate if he doesn’t make repairs. At this stage, real power is shown, not just good arguments and facts. (Not every event needs to be a direct confrontation. A community parade, picnic, or even a party to celebrate a victory can also build the group and become a show of numbers. Invite allied elected officials to join you.) But the main reason for holding such events is often to develop the strength of the organization.

Every planning session for an event should include a discussion of how to use the event to build the group. Often people become so focused on what they will say to the decision maker that organization building is forgotten. Planning to build the organization must be specific. How many new people will be recruited, where, how, and by whom? Must the event be held after six o’clock so that working people can come? Must it be before three so that mothers of school-age children can come? How will new people be integrated into the group? How will all the members be told what happened? Perhaps a telephone tree

should be activated or an evening leaflet distribution planned. In general, each event should be larger than the last one. If this isn’t happening, then you are not building the organization. Another measure of organizational strength is the experience level of its leaders and members. A local organization that can hold two events at the same time is quite well developed. Plan leadership training into each event. This means practice beforehand and evaluate afterward.

In the course of the issue campaign an election may occur. This offers the organization a fine opportunity to build more strength. (The events described so far have probably taken four to five months to unfold.) During the election season, the organization may do some combination of the following:

- Hold a candidates’ night and ask candidates to take a position on the organization’s issue. This can be done even if the winner of the election can’t really give the group what it wants. Candidates take *symbolic* positions supporting all sorts of things, and an angle for real support can usually be found as well. Members can also attend candidates’ nights sponsored by other groups and raise the issue there.
- Allied candidates can be asked to campaign on the issue and mention it in their literature (if it is cut broadly enough to really win votes).
- The organization can register voters as a show of strength in specific areas.
- Some organizations, depending on their IRS (Internal Revenue Service) tax status, can make endorsements and campaign for or against candidates. Others can’t.

7. *Win or Regroup.* After a series of successful buildup events, the organization takes on the main decision maker. Sometimes this is done

in an action or confrontation and sometimes in a negotiation. Often a victory is won or a compromise is reached. If not, the organization must be prepared to escalate its tactics. This may mean large demonstrations and picketing, a return to other secondary targets, or the selection of a new main target. Sometimes the issue has to be broadened to attract still more supporters and the campaign taken to a new level. The refusal of a locality to control toxic dumping can lead, for example, to a broader fight for statewide legislation or enforcement. At other times, the organization may decide that it has reached the limit of its strength and that it will have to lower its demand and accept less.

At each of these stages, the organization is being strengthened internally in addition to power being built. The leadership is growing and gaining experience, skill, and media recognition. The membership is growing. Other organizations are moving into closer alliance. Money is being raised. The staff is becoming experienced in organizing and electoral tactics.

Tricks the Other Side Uses

In the years since this manual was first published, citizen organizations have grown more experienced and more creative. At the same time, our opponents have become more skillful at countering our efforts. Here are some of their tricks.

"Let's negotiate." Often, what your opponents most want is to get you to stop organizing in the community and to start spending hours sitting around a table with them. Of course, they say, you can't add new people as the negotiations progress because new people wouldn't know the background. Of course you don't want to talk to the press or anyone else because that would be a

breach of confidence. Of course you have to stop doing actions and public events because that creates a bad atmosphere for the negotiations. The campaign comes to a stop. Meanwhile, weeks go by. You lose momentum. Your opponents hire negotiators to sit and talk with you while you must burn up the time of your leaders and organizers. The members who are not "at the table" feel left out and are sure that some awful sellout is developing when they hear you referring to your opponents by their first names. Allies begin to draw back.

What's wrong with this picture? What's wrong is that you began negotiations with no power. Negotiations, by definition, are what goes on between parties of equal power, each of whom has something the other party wants and each of whom is prepared to give up something in order to get something. If that is the real situation, then fine, keep negotiating. In fact, most direct action campaigns do end in some form of negotiation after the organization has actually won. However, when the offer to negotiate comes early in the campaign, it is usually just a tactic to delay and to divide you. It also gives your opponents a chance to size you up, find the weaknesses in your coalition, and buy off your leadership.

"You are invited to the 'stakeholders' meeting." We have seen this one a lot in recent years. Consumer and environmental groups are invited by representatives of the Governor, or a department of the state, to participate in a long series of meetings with other "stakeholders," including representatives of business or industry and state agencies. The goal, you are told, is to frame legislation that will "please everyone" on a particular issue. Why are you invited? Why do they care if you are pleased or not? They don't! They are simply buying your silence for a year, which is about how long it would take to prepare the legislation anyway. You play by their rules in

the hope of getting some small measure of your program into the legislation. You may even succeed, but meanwhile, the time is lost during which you could have been out mobilizing people or spreading the alarm. Then the bill goes to the legislature, but not having built your base during the negotiations, you are unprepared for the fight. Some of your people want to support the bill because of the crumbs you have been given and because they worked so hard on it. Others want to oppose it because the crumbs don't deal with the big picture.

Here is the test of whether you should participate in a process of this type. Tell whoever invites you that you will go to the meetings but that you intend to continue your public campaign on the issue and that because you represent a citizen watchdog group, nothing can be confidential. In fact, you feel it is your *duty* to make public anything and everything you hear at the meetings. If the invitation still stands and you are really able to conduct a public campaign at the same time, then go and participate. An inside/outside strategy can be very powerful if you use the information you get at the "stakeholders" meeting to fuel your campaign. Just remember—and we say this because so many have forgotten—when you get into a room with powerful corporations, you are not one stakeholder among equals and never will be.

"I can get you on the Governor's commission." Commissions, study groups, round tables, and panels exist at every level of government. Many are established to genuinely promote discussions of public policy and reach consensus. Once your organization succeeds in applying pressure to elected officials, it is likely to get offered seats on some such body. Ask yourself, is our opinion genuinely desired, or is this a ploy to swing us over to an insider strategy (trying to influence from within instead of pressuring from without)? Is this yet

another way to tie us up in endless deliberations? Sometimes you will be asked not to discuss the work of the commission publicly or even not to comment on its direction. Months can be spent producing a report that then comes to nothing. Your group can be divided between people who think that they are now really making policy and those who want to work independently.

"Go work it out among yourselves." Perhaps you are interested in a patient bill of rights. "So are a lot of other groups," says the chair of the legislative committee, and, "We don't want to bring a bill to the floor and have it lose. So get together with the other interested parties and come up with something you all agree on." The next thing you know, you are meeting with representatives of industry and professional societies, groups over which you have absolutely no power. The elected officials, over whom you do have power, have conveniently gotten rid of you, even though they are the only ones who can actually give you what you want. Your job is to force them to do the right thing or else to get them thrown out of office, not to compromise away your position in meetings with people whose interests are opposed to yours.

"I'm the wrong person." You might be told, "I would love to help you, but I'm not the right person to see." This response is usually a shabby trick to make you feel stupid for having not known whom to see. Often it is the start of a process in which no one will admit to being the right person and you will get sent from one official to the next. The Police will say it is a Parks Department problem. The Parks Department will say it's really a Traffic Department problem, and so on. Some groups have responded by holding a community meeting and inviting all of the "wrong" people. Once they're in the same room, it is harder for them to pass the buck. Usually, though, this response indicates that you are talking

to appointed rather than elected officials. The City Council member from your neighborhood may not alone be able to deliver what you want but can't claim to be the "wrong person."

"This could affect your funding." Perhaps this line ought not be listed under "tricks" because it may very well be true. Organizations that receive money from any level of government, often in the form of a contract for some community service or education program, will quickly have the money taken away if they "rock the boat." It is very difficult to combine service and direct action in the same organization. Often these two functions need to be divided out. Foundations will also pull your funding if you venture into policy areas of which they do not approve.

"You are reasonable but your allies aren't. Can't we just deal with you?" This should be seen for just what it is, an attempt to divide your coalition and make you think you will win something if you dump your more militant partners.

A consultant speaking to a group of corporate executives once laid out how this trick works:

"Activists fall into three basic categories: radicals, idealists, and realists. The first step is to isolate and marginalize the radicals. They're the ones who see

inherent structural problems that need remedying if indeed a particular change is to occur. To isolate them, try to create the perception in the public mind that people advocating fundamental solutions are terrorists, extremists, fear mongers, outsiders, communists, or whatever. After marginalizing the radicals, then identify and educate the idealists—concerned and sympathetic members of the public—by convincing them that changes advocated by the radicals would hurt people.

The goal is to sour the idealists on the idea of working with the radicals. Instead, get them working with the realists. Realists are people who want reform but don't really want to upset the status quo; big public-interest organizations that rely on foundation grants and corporate contributions are a prime example. With correct handling, realists can be counted on to cut a deal with industry that can be touted as a 'win-win' solution but that is actually an industry victory."

ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

MIDWEST ACADEMY MANUAL FOR ACTIVISTS

Kim Bobo

Jackie Kendall

Steve Max



SEVEN LOCKS PRESS

Santa Ana, California
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Washington, D.C.

©1991, 1996, 2001 Midwest Academy

First edition 1991

Third edition 2001

All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bobo, Kimberley A.

Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy manual for activists/ Kim Bobo, Jackie

Kendall, Steve Max. —3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-929765-94-X

I. Direct action—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Kendall, Jackie. II. Max, Steve. III. Midwest Academy. IV. Title.

JC328.3.B632 2001

322.4'3'068—dc21

2001020331

Manufactured in the United States of America

Cover design by Kirschner ■ Caroff Design, Inc., New York, NY

Seven Locks Press is a formerly Washington-based book publisher of non-fiction works on social, political, and cultural issues. It takes its name from a series of lift locks on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Seven Locks Press relocated to California in 1994.

For more information, call or write:

Seven Locks Press

P.O. Box 25689

Santa Ana, CA 92799

800-354-5348