

Organizing Toolbox 1999

Strategy: The Fundamentals

There is an old saying: "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Too often, community groups working for social change start out on the road without a clear sense of where they are going, and without a shared understanding of the best route for getting there.

A strategy is simply a road map for getting to your destination or achieving your goal. Just like a route map you might put together for taking a family vacation in your car, a strategy takes into account what you might need or want to do along the way. On a car trip, you take into account places to stop for meals, gas, lodging, and to see friends. You also decide whether you want to travel by the shortest route or take alternate roads to visit attractions or avoid highway construction and congested areas. You decide whether or not to use toll roads, and make sure you have enough cash to pay for the tolls, as well as any gas, food, or lodging you may need.

In a similar way, developing a strategy for reaching a goal of your group involves considering a number of factors other than your ultimate destination. A strategy helps the group understand how to put its own values into action in practical ways. It helps the group obtain the resources it will need to make the trip without running out of energy before you get there. With a shared plan of action understood by the whole group, hopefully you will be able to achieve the outcome you want on the issue you are working on. But even if you don't, a good strategy will leave the group stronger and larger than it was when it first started out, and ready to try to reach its goal, or set new ones, with more resources than it had originally.

Basically, a useful strategy makes it possible to do four things at once:

1. Clearly define an issue and its possible solutions;
2. Make it easy to get more people involved;
3. Bring the people who have the power to bring about the solutions you want directly into contact with your group;
4. Raise the money or other resources you need to carry out the work you plan to do.

Analysis

Just as you gather information and think about your alternatives before starting out on a long car trip, most of the work of developing a strategy goes on before you take public action on the issue. And, just like on a long car trip, unexpected events or circumstances may make you adjust your original plans. There are three main types of information-gathering and analysis that need to take place, and everyone in the group can contribute to some part of it.

The Issue

As a group, clearly define what you are trying to change. Too often, community groups spend a lot of time describing what the problem is without figuring out if there is any way to change the way things are. It is important to describe the problem, but even more important to articulate the change you want to see. For example, if you are a group of parents concerned that 80 percent of the high school students suspended last year were children of color, even though students of color made up only 40 percent of the student population, it is important to both document these facts and discuss possible solutions within the group. If

you simply tell the facts to school officials, without a clear sense of what you want officials to do about the situation, you run the risk of getting solutions you don't like, don't understand, or that make the problem worse or create new problems.

Even more importantly, if you don't discuss possible solutions, it will be very difficult to get more parents involved. No one likes to hear bad news with no sense that anything can be done about it. Keep in mind that describing the problem and asking parents who have not been involved before to come up with possible solutions is a good way to build your group. So document and discuss the issue you are working on, but spend even more energy involving people in coming up with creative solutions to the problem.

The community or constituency affected by the issue

Carefully think through who the people are who might have an interest in the issue you are working on. In the example we are using, parents and students obviously have a direct interest in the issue, but think through other possible people or categories of people who might share an interest in this issue. Based on your own knowledge within the group, or deliberate interviews you do with other members of the community, is it possible that local clergy, civil rights, or business leaders might support you on your issue? What interest might they have in your issue? Make plans to contact as many of these people as possible, both directly and through the media. Much of the early part of a strategy involves building up community support for the issue you are working on. Plan to put most of your group's energy into direct contact with individuals and small groups in the early part of your strategy; plan to use the media as your group goes more public on the issue. Contact reporters or editors your group thinks might be interested in the issue early on.

The power structure and decision-makers on your issue

In addition to documenting the facts and describing possible solutions for the issue your group is working on, and having a clear plan to build community support for the issue through direct contact with people who have an interest in the issue, it is important to sort out who has the power to make the decision you want made. It is also important to figure out how the person relates to other people in the power structure in your community.

If your group has any history of contact with the decision-makers on this issue, talk through that history again, so the whole group has the benefit of that history. Discuss the relationships among the various decision-makers, if there is more than one (the members of the school board, for example). Flesh out bits of information you may not know about (the procedure for public input at school board meetings, for instance). Your group needs to know as much as possible about how the decision-makers do business, not just to be effective, but to feel confident in addressing them in the public arena.

The Plan

After your group has sorted out its options in the areas of the issue, community, and power structure, it's time to put together the plan that is called a strategy.

Goal

First, set a clear goal. In the example we're using, the group might decide that it wants to see a 50 percent reduction in the suspension of students of color in the current school year. The group may come up with a variety of proposals to get there. Planning to have lots of small group discussions in the community and among parents and students may be part of the strategy for developing creative proposals.

Two organizational goals should also be included in any issue strategy you develop. The first is to increase participation in your group. That means reaching out to people who are not already active but might have

an interest in the issue, and giving them an opportunity to participate in effective work on something they care about. The second is to raise at least as much money as it costs to work on the issue, and hopefully raise more than costs in order to provide funds for general expenses and future work.

Targets

Second, define a clear target. A target is a decision-maker or decision-makers who have the power to make the change you are calling for. Targets are always people, not institutions. For example, if there are five school-board members, there are five possible targets, but you only need three of five votes to get the change you want. The group needs to discuss whether to target all five school board members, or just work on three or four. The power analysis the group did on these decision-makers and their relationships to others in the community will inform the decision you make about whom to target and why.

Tactics

Third, develop a set of activities or steps that will move you toward your three goals: achieving the result you want on your issue; involving new people in your group; and raising the money and other resources you need to carry on your work. Some of the activities you will choose are often called tactics. A strategy is a general plan, and tactics are the specific actions you take to reach your goals. For example, the tactics for the issue we're describing here might include holding 15 small group meetings with 10 parents each to develop solutions, contacting 10 members of the clergy for support on the issue, meeting with a local television reporter to get your side of the story to the general public, interviewing all the school board members to figure out the power relationships and define your targets, sending out a mailing and asking for donations to continue work on the issue, holding a press conference, and inviting the school board to a public meeting where your group presents its solutions and asks the school board to implement them.

Timeline and Evaluation

The next step in developing a strategy is to put all your activities on a calendar or timeline so the whole group has an understanding of when various parts of the work need to be done. After that, the group can follow the plan, and meet regularly to adjust it, making changes as circumstances and events require. Work on some issues takes months and even years. Be sure to evaluate your progress as a group at regular intervals, and celebrate little victories along the way with group dinners, awards ceremonies, or other social events.

Taking the time to include as many people as possible in developing a strategy, and paying special attention to bringing new people into your group on each new issue you work on will help your group grow, not only in numbers, but in sophistication and power over time. As the group builds up its collective knowledge and experience with the power structure, and builds working alliances with other constituencies in the community, it becomes possible to set more and more ambitious goals for change – and reach them.

Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editors of local and statewide newspapers are a good way to express your views on an issue while also providing important information to the public. The "Letters to the Editor" section is one of the most popular sections of newspapers, assuring letter writers a wide audience for their views.

Letters render a valuable service to the public by providing information and viewpoints that might not be reported in other sections of the newspaper. Many people have not had the same kinds of experiences you have had, or may have been misinformed about these issues. Your letter can help them gain new insights, and hopefully, encourage them to take some action!

In order to be effective, a letter must be well written and understandable. The following are some tips on writing effective letters to the editors. These tips are also helpful in writing letters to legislators or other public officials you may ask for support on these issues.

- Think about what you want to say before you begin to write; your ideas should be clear in your own mind before you begin to put them on paper.
- Don't try to explain everything there is on an issue. Think of what is most important to you about this issue and focus your letter on it. And remember to emphasize what action you want the reader to take contacting their legislator, writing to the governor, etc.
- Make your letter easy to read; short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words are best. Make sure to include your name, address and phone number because they usually contact letter-writers to confirm that you were the one to send the letter.
- * Keep your letter positive. It is more important to emphasize your points and what people need to do to help instead of making things more confusing.
- Don't be rude or threatening. That will often hurt your cause.
- Always send an original, even if you send the same letter to a number of papers. Most papers won't print a letter that is not signed.
- Target your letters, especially to areas that have had little coverage on the issue. Try to imagine who will be reading your letter (farmers, urban residents, unemployed people) and think of what their particular concerns are and what arguments might be persuasive to them.
- Many television and some radio stations have forums for the public to express their views. You may want to send a letter to these stations, too.

Don't be discouraged if your letter is not printed right away, or printed at all. The larger newspapers often have more letters than they can print, or may not print more than one or two letters on a certain topic. Even if only one out of ten letters is printed, you have reached thousands of readers - enough to make your effort worthwhile.

If the editorial position of a newspaper is in opposition to your view or it shies away from printing letters about political or "controversial" issues, remember that it is possible to lobby an editor or editorial board just as you would a legislator. Ask for a meeting, invite others who share your views to go with you and go prepared with specific requests. Remind the editor or publisher that they have an obligation to inform their readers of these public issues.

Where to write:

Bristol Herald Courier
P.O Box 609
Bristol, VA 24203
letters@bristolnews.com

The Daily News Leader
231 South Liberty Street
P.O Box 193
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
www.dnronline.com/letteredit.php?LID=O

The Daily Progress
685 Rio Road W
Charlottesville, VA 22901
www.dailyprogress.com/cdp/news/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/

Danville Register & Bee
700 Monument Street
Danville, VA 24541

The Farmville Herald
P.O. Box 307
Farmville, VA 23901
heraldnews@kinex.com

The Freelance Star
616 Amelia Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
letters@freelancestar.com

The Hopewell News
P.O. Box 481
516 Randolph Road
Hopewell, VA 23860

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P.O. Box 10129
Lynchburg, VA 24506-0129

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P.O. Box 2470
Woodbridge, VA 22193
www.insidenova.com/isn/news/opinion/letters-to-the-editor-submit/

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