

## BEFORE AND AFTER THE ACTION

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Community organizations have relied on a long list of conflict tactics over the years, from mass demonstrations to quietly ensnaring bureaucracies in their own red tape. But the cornerstone of these grassroots battles has always been face-to-face confrontation of officials working for big, high-powered organizations and institutions. It isn't conflict for its own sake, but to create incentives for the other side to negotiate in good faith, to reach an agreement that takes care of a problem. The point is, to have genuine bargaining, first we have to show the other side our power.

The confrontations have three stages: planning, action, and review. While most of the organization's resources may go into the action itself, planning and review are often misunderstood and mismanaged—and yet they may be the most critical factors in success over the long haul.

### Scripting Battles

In planning for a confrontation, grassroots organizations need to make both offensive and defensive preparations. Offensive planning begins with the organization members questioning themselves. The purpose is to clarify specific demands and expectations for the action within the context of campaign goals and whatever handles are available to leverage the target. Discussions are easily started with open-ended questions: What's our main goal in this action? What do we specifically want from this meeting? What demands are we going to make? What reactions are we likely to get? What do they want from us? What's their hidden agenda? And so on.

The answers make up an organizational script for the confrontation. The action isn't a casual bull session between self-appointed individuals and the opposition's representatives. It's a highly disciplined tactic of citizens consciously selected by other members of their organization. Particular individuals are named or approved to handle various parts in the action, from up-front speaking to behind-the-scenes monitoring. Together in their own meeting, beforehand, they combine their plans into a script—it's not a word-for-word monologue but a short summary of cues to demands, questions, and statements for their opponent.

Role-playing the offensive plan not only helps people anticipate probable situations and prepare for them, it's also a way to work out fantasies and

fears that keep people from showing up at the confrontation. It's especially helpful for those who are most inexperienced and unsophisticated. Some have told me that they imagine being publicly assaulted, arrested, and even spit on. A lot of this fear can be overcome by an organizer who is guiding a thoughtful, realistic role-play that looks at what's likely to be encountered, and that stimulates discussion about the options that people have to deal with difficult or dangerous situations that may come up.

Budding activists sometimes are most put off not by fear of arrest or violence but by confusion, uncertainty, and a sense of helplessness in unknown situations. I remember new members of one organization who were concerned about what might happen at a sit-in if someone tried to move them bodily. But their fear and hesitation to act melted almost visibly as they talked about different kinds of passive resistance and ways to get out of jail if arrested.

### Protective Armor

Role-playing is even more important in defensive planning. It's the best way for organizers to help people develop the intellectual, verbal, and emotional armament they need to successfully meet their opponents' attacks. Their preparation should give them the means to see and stop attempts to shift or commandeer the agenda in the confrontation, to divide the grassroots delegation into smaller, isolated groups, or to paint the organizer as an outside agitator. This is also a time when the newest members of the organization are helped to distinguish between more or less natural allies—those with values, goals, and methods very similar to their own—and others with whom they may negotiate a temporary agreement after successful actions in a campaign.

During the time before good faith negotiations begin, when the organization is building its power through action, defensive planning should be guided by four basic rules for confrontations: no give-aways, no explanations, no justifications, and no arguments. Sometimes it's necessary to remind people that the immediate objective is not bargaining but building power. The role-playing preparation encourages them to stay with the rules in practice.

- Self-defeating giveaways of strategic information are the natural inclination of novice activists. Presumably it's the result of naiveté about power, ignorance of the links between economic interests and political commitments, a simplistic belief that if the official only "understood," everything would be okay. The less sophisticated members tend to define covert opponents as prospective allies, proceeding then to give away the store.
- The rule against making explanations in a power-building confrontation is based on the sure prediction that opponents will attempt to sidestep the organization's issue, say the demand for removal of a toxic waste dump, by making a counter-demand to know *why* the grassroots group has taken its position—a variation on the theme of answering a question with a question. The chemical company's goal is to get the citizens to ignore what's well known to both parties, namely that improperly disposed toxic materials cause sickness and death, and thus entice them into explanations—as if the company was ignorant or the facts were arguable. Getting people into useless explanations is a good way to redefine issues and evade demands for action.
- Avoiding self-justification in confrontations is another rule to stop the opposition from manipulating your side into what's self-defeating. The opponent may try to get people to justify themselves by acting outraged or indignant about some past action of the organization or one of its members or the staff, or some other ploy may be used. But in any case a diversion is contrived to put your people on the defensive, getting them caught up in self-justification as a way to avoid their issue and demands.
- Getting unsophisticated activists into argumentative debate is probably the best verbal sham used by officials trying to divert grassroots organizations. Citizens are pulled into this game by the subtle suggestion that fair and reasonable people are always willing to meet and talk out their disagreements. The rub is that when politicians and other power brokers imagine themselves to be in unassailable positions, with little or no incentive to negotiate in good faith, they feign discussion to convince the politically naive that both sides of issues are being seriously considered. The sham telltale is that their argumentative debate is devoted to blocking every proposed solution instead of openly examining the feasibility of each one. And of course as long as people are kept busy in useless debate, power-building actions are suspended.

### **Ideological Consensus**

Systematically reviewing what happened in a confrontation, especially with a large membership involved, is something easily put off and forgot-

ten. That's even more likely when the action is successful and people are excited, although failure and disappointment can have the same effect. Review is possible nonetheless, even under difficult conditions, if plans are made ahead of time. When, for example, members are being bused to and from an action, a review can be done separately with each bus group on their return trip. In any case, developing the habit and organizational discipline of immediate post-action review takes a continued commitment by the organizer.

The period after a confrontation sometimes finds the participants confused. They seem to know what occurred factually, that is, who said what, when, who responded, etc. But there tends to be a lot of uncertainty about the *meaning* of what took place. Were the things that happened good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or not to our side? The basic purpose of reviewing the action is to develop among the organization's members a consensus definition of the experience. This is mainly a process of their construction of an ideological reality.

The organizer draws out from as many people as possible their individual perceptions of what happened and what things mean, and then helps tie these subjective descriptions and definitions together into an objective reality that's shared generally within the organization. I get this kind of discussion going with exploratory questions: What happened? What do you think he meant when he said that? Do you think she's secretly sympathetic to our side? Was the concession real for them? Do you imagine they think we can hurt them?

When the review works well it not only creates an ideological viewpoint within the organization but also highlights any gap between the opponent's verbal and symbolic gestures and actual, substantive concessions. Whatever the concessions, it's hard to get ironclad guarantees that they'll be delivered. Not surprisingly, transforming them into practice usually turns out to be more energy-consuming than getting the original verbal agreements.

In their talk after the action, then, the members of the organization construct shared ideological meanings for the most important aspects of the confrontation, what players and their parts in it mean, and their implications for future action. It's through this social construction of meaning that the successes and failures of the action are "discovered," allowing people to celebrate their victories as well as correct their mistakes.

All of this isn't to deny the more down-to-earth reasons for reviewing the action. It's necessary to gauge turnouts and, later, press coverage; to check the work of leaders and committees against their assignments and commitments; and certainly to make sure that people think of the confrontation not as an isolated event but linked to a series of actions in an

ongoing campaign.

The bottom line is that organizing commonly suffers because not enough attention is paid to what happens before and after the action. The problem is intensified because so many organization members

at any point in time are newcomers, easily blown away by fear and misunderstanding. On the other hand, with careful planning and review, confrontations easily confirm and vitalize commitments to action.

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