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Grassroots Organizational Battles

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To anyone who has been in a battle between two organizations, the contrast to conflict between individuals is striking. Most people, however, have not had direct, firsthand experience in organizational conflict. And newcomers to organizational life—to power-directed grass-roots organizations in particular—often mistakenly project the qualities of personal battles they have experienced into their concept of organizational battle. They tend to view it as a one-on-one phenomenon, as a contest of words and ideas.

It is important for organizational members to understand that conflict between organizational entities is a staged affair. When a community action group and a politician become opponents, for example, it is almost never a close-quarters battle fought extemporaneously by individuals. Such a conflict is made up of complex motives and defensive responses. The action is planned and executed by disciplined, organized bodies, with different stakes, principles, and objectives. They are usually at some distance from one another and rarely in direct confrontation.

The organizational battle begins with the process of identifying an opponent—"choosing off" in street talk. This is an important juncture and one that should be symbolically identified. The initial attitude toward politicians of organizations whose members are politically unsophisticated is one of overt respect and covert distrust. After all, convention and propriety dictate that we do not pick fights but instead try to settle our differences through reasonable discussion, and there is thus a prevailing tendency to approach politicians in a friendly and respectful manner, despite deep-seated cynicism.

In fact, the politically naive tend to treat as potential allies the very politicians who are likely to become opponents in the future. They ignore the connections between political commitments and vested interests, and imagine that if the congressional representative or other elected official only "understood" the organization's position and reasoning, he would be sympathetic and act or vote accordingly. John L. Lewis, the famed labor leader and organizer, confessed his own addiction to this belief when he wrote:

> My greatest error was to believe too long that the innate fairness and sense of humor of the leaders of finance and industry should cause them to voluntarily work with labor for the solution of our great economic questions and the problems of industrial relationship.[1]

Thus, in the first stages of organizational conflict when a community organization is presenting its position to a politician, bureaucrat, or corporate official, it is important that the latter's transformation from potential ally to defined opponent be dramatized for all the organization's members to see. To do this, the organizer must insure that time is set aside and that the members' energy is invested in examining their unproductive experience with the politician and arriving at a consensus definition of the officeholder as a formal opponent. This is mainly a process of reality construction: the organizer elicits members' subjective views of the politician as an opponent and helps tie those views together into an objective reality that is mutually shared within the organization.[2]

When the opponent has been identified, it is time to take action. Always take the offensive—and hold it. This is the first ground rule for successful action. The side that acts first on this principle enjoys the "choice of weapons" (issues), the pick of time and place of battle, and the critical psychological and publicity advantage of surprise.

The second ground rule is that once conflict has been initiated through offensive action, take the cue for the next move from the opponent's defensive response. Alinsky put it this way: "The real action is in the enemy's reaction. The enemy properly goaded and guided in his reaction will be your major strength."[3] Every organization should have an intelligence-gathering operation to carefully observe the opponent's reactions to offensives. While reactions are never completely predictable, politicians tend to react to publicity, bureaucrats to disruption, and corporations to loss of product reputation.

The third rule is to remember that it is crucial not to be sucked into defensive strategies that relinquish to the opponent the choice of issues and of time and place of encounter. Shrewd opponents will be initiating their own offensives and searching for responses. Community organizations especially must guard against divide-and-conquer strategies. When under attack, it is obviously important to raise one's guard, but it is equally important to view an attack as a signal to sidestep and to launch a new offensive.

The final ground rule for successful organizational conflict recognizes both the potency of initiating offensives and the strain of withstanding them. The rule is this: When subjected to overwhelming attack by an opponent who is enjoying the choice of issues and timing, and the means are not at hand to launch one's own offensive, beat a "strategic retreat."[4] Do not get caught up in the useless business of face-saving. Retreat, conserve resources, regroup, and redirect the action on more favorable terms. ◀

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[1] John L. Lewis as quoted in Bruce Minton and John Stuart, *Men Who Lead Labor* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937), p. 161.

[2] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 18–29. *See also* Warren C. Haggstrom, "Can the Poor Transform the World?" in Irwin Deutscher and Elizabeth J. Thompson, eds., *Among the People: Encounters with the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 75; "The Psychological Implications of Community Development Process," in Lee J. Cary, ed., *Community Development as a Process* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970), pp. 85–87, 106; and *The Practice of Socio-Analysis* (mimeographed, n.d.), pp. 1–5).

[3] Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 136.

[4] Mao Tse Tung, "Strategic Retreat," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2 (New York: International Publishers Co., 1954).