

HOW TO Develop a Winning Strategy

“SAM”

A winning strategy is built on objectives that are specific, achievable and measurable.

Specific: everyone in your group knows and agrees on the goal or objective.

Achievable: It's realistic, or at least conceivable that you can win.

Measurable: You can tell whether you've won or lost when the campaign is over.

ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Working on a campaign is the most exciting work an organization can do, but community organizing requires a balance of work on issues and building your organization. Most groups recruit more members, raise more money, develop new skills and have more fun during a “hot” issue campaign.

A good issue campaign should include organizational objectives as well as issue objectives: How many new members will you recruit during the campaign? Which of your members will learn new leadership skills (speaking in public, helping carry out the campaign, running a planning meeting, doing research)? How much money will you raise to carry out the campaign?

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

You have an issue you really care about and a group of people like you want to do something about it. There are powerful people who don't want what you want, and you don't have very much power.

You need a strategy. Once you have decided to work on an issue, you must develop an overall strategy, or campaign, to win on that issue. A campaign helps you take the initiative, to make your opposition react to you instead of you always reacting to them. A campaign is simply your plan. It's a description of how you'll accomplish what you want to accomplish.

A campaign is like a road map. If you and your friends took a trip in several cars, you'd decide where to go, how to get there, how long it will take and when to arrive before starting out. Without a route drawn on a road map you would all drive around aimlessly, arriving at different places at different times.

Organizing for improvements in your community is a lot more complex, difficult, and time-consuming than going on vacation. You need a road map that shows:

- **Goals and objectives** (what you want)
- The **targets** or **decision makers** (who can give you what you want)
- **Allies** and **opponents** (who's on your side, who's not)
- **Research needs** (what you need to know)
- **Resources** (what you have to work with, or need to get, to carry out the campaign);
- **Tactics: actions and activities**

(specific steps you'll take to win the issue and build your organization).

Without a clear plan outlining these elements of a campaign, you're unlikely to win concrete improvements on the issue you care about. It's not enough to say you will “work on” an issue. You need a good strategy.

The more members who help develop your campaign strategy, the more good ideas you will come up with. Strategy decisions are important and should be made democratically. You may want to have a campaign committee to come up with a proposal for the whole group to look at.



It may take several evenings or a day-long meeting to come up with a good campaign plan in your group. Put a chart up on the wall with all of the basic elements of a campaign, and take the time to talk through each part of it. Then review the chart regularly to evaluate your progress and make changes.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH? GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goals and objectives are what you want to accomplish on an issue. Many groups use the word **goals** to mean things they want that may take more time to win and have more reach.

Objectives can be achieved more quickly, and can be stated in a short phrase with this structure: to [do something] [how much] [by when].” For example, a *goal* might be “Cleaner air in our county.” An *objective* would be, “to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions 25% by the end of the year.”

Objectives are the basis for making **demands** of a **decision maker**. They should be specific, achievable and measurable. If your objective is “to educate the

public,” you set your campaign up to fail. This doesn’t mean public education isn’t important; almost any campaign needs a good public education effort. But it’s not a good objective for a community organization. Here’s why:

It’s not a *basis for a demand*. Public education is a means to an end, not the end itself.

It’s not *specific*. It can mean lots of different things to different people in your group and in your community. What will you educate people about? Who is the “public” you will educate?

It’s not *achievable*. You can’t gather the resources to educate everyone on your issue.

It’s not *measurable*. A year from now, you won’t be able to tell whether you have won or lost. How would you measure whether you have educated the public?

When you get into the heat of the campaign, it’s important to be *specific* about just what you are after.

Several years ago, ranchers in Montana organized a local group to fight a proposed railroad that would have divided their river valley, ruined many ranches and destroyed their communities and the environment. They wanted to keep developers from getting permits for the railroad and an associated coal mine.

Goals	Who Makes the Decisions?	Potential Allies	Potential Opponents	Resources Have	Resources Need	Research Needs	Building the Organization	Actions and Activities
Specific Objectives								

The railroad company got the permits. The group became demoralized, and eventually disbanded. They should have celebrated! There is still no railroad and no coal mine more than twenty years later (other groups are still fighting to keep it that way). Because the group forgot their specific goals and objectives they thought they had lost the campaign.

Your objective should be *achievable*, even if that means it isn’t everything you want. If you set your sights too high and never win anything, people will drop out of your campaign and your group. On the other hand, if you pick *part* of what you want as a campaign objective and win it, you’ve got momentum to launch a new campaign to get the rest.

Good objectives must be *measurable* if you’re going to be able to tell your own members, decision makers, potential allies and the press what you want. If you want 25% less sulfur dioxide pollution by the end of the year, you can demand that polluters reduce their emissions, or that government agencies set lower limits and enforce them. If you only say you want clean air, what can you ask of polluters or government officials?

MEDIA STRATEGY

How do we get our side of this issue in the paper and on TV? That’s often the first question people ask as they try to figure out how to win a campaign.

A good story on TV or in the paper can be very helpful: it can send a message to the decision maker, demoralize your opponents, bring credibility to your group or boost the morale of volunteers. Spending the time to develop a good media strategy can be critical to winning your issue.

Remember, though, that **media coverage is a campaign tool, not an end in itself**. Your main goal isn’t a picture in the paper, it’s clean air. TV, radio or print coverage is a good tool if it helps you **build your organization** by encouraging new members or giving you credibility, or if it increases the pressure on the decision maker to give you what you want.

WHO CAN GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WANT? DECISION MAKERS (TARGETS)

Decision makers are those who have the power and responsibility to make the changes you want, to meet your demands, to make decisions that lead towards the achievement of our objectives. Some citizens groups use the shorter word, targets, to mean the same thing. Whatever word you use, **remember who can give you what you want** – and who can't. Many campaigns have foundered as angry citizens put all their efforts into answering their *opponents'* charges instead of building pressure on the person who could really give them what they want – the *decision maker*.

Decision makers are often government officials, because they set and enforce policies that are important to our groups. We sometimes forget that demands can be presented to powerful individuals or corporations. Who the decision maker is depends on your objective.

WHO'S WITH YOU? WHO'S AGAINST YOU? ALLIES & OPPONENTS

Allies are people who might share your goals or objectives or support your efforts. They are individuals or groups who would add to your power to achieve your objectives.

Opponents are those who stand to lose or will feel threatened by achievement of your goals or objectives. They will actively oppose you.

List *potential* allies and opponents at the beginning of a campaign. Many individuals and groups will not have a position, or may have conflicting interests and loyalties, and could end up in either camp. You want to convert or neutralize as many potential opponents as possible and prepare for those you can't influence. You want to identify potential allies who could help you the most and have a plan to recruit them.

WHAT MUST YOU KNOW TO WIN? WHAT DO YOU NEED TO WIN? RESOURCES & RESEARCH NEEDS

Resources are the things you have or need to get that will help you achieve your objective: your membership (how big is it?), money (how much do you have, how much do you need, what's the budget for this campaign?), your group's reputation, contacts in the media, legal or expert advice, laws or regulations that will help if properly enforced, fact sheets, polling data, studies that support your position, and so on.

Research needs are questions you must answer to develop and run your campaign. Identify research that will make your case more credible, but don't despair if you don't find a "magic bullet," a single piece of information that will prove you're right and force the decision maker to give in. You may also need to do research to make your objective more specific or to determine what is achievable. You need to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the decision-maker, to know the laws, regulations and deadlines that govern the decision making process, and to find the names, addresses, and contacts of allies and potential new members.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? TACTICS: ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Tactics are all the things you will do in the campaign, the individual steps along the road. The most important – and fun – steps to plan are actions: the things you will do to put pressure on the decision maker to meet your demands: write letters, make phone calls, march on City Hall, demonstrate in front of someone's house, hold a press conference, circulate a petition, hold an accountability session with the decision maker.



Community organizations plan actions that are non-violent, but the only other limits to the kinds of actions you take are your imagination and what your members decide is appropriate and effective. Try thinking like the decision maker or like your opponents. What actions would make it harder for the decision maker to ignore your demands? What can you do that would neutralize your opponents?

Once you have a list of possible actions and activities, put priorities to the list. Which ideas can you really pull off? Which do you have to do to win? How can you design a campaign that builds your power and the pressure on the decision maker with each step?

It's usually more effective to start with low-pressure actions like letter-writing, and build up to accountability sessions and other high-pressure, high-stakes tactics. You wouldn't normally begin a campaign by chaining yourselves to a tree in the decision maker's front yard. Most people aren't comfortable with such strong actions until their more polite approaches have been rejected. A strong tactic is more effective when the decision maker has learned about your group and your demand under more conventional circumstances.

TAKING NAMES

Be specific when you make lists on a campaign chart. You want to motivate your allies to help you, minimize and neutralize the opposition, and increase pressure on the decision maker, so you need names (and addresses or phone numbers). It's even better if you can name a contact person for each ally, opponent and decision maker.

If you want a 25% reduction in sulfur dioxide pollution, it's no help to list "environmentalists" as allies and "industry" as opponents. List "Mary Jones, President of the Local Chapter of the Sierra Club," and "Bill Smith, plant manager of the Global Oil refinery on Highway 2." It doesn't help to know that "The State" is the decision maker. You need to know that it is the Board of Health which meets at a specific time and place and has seven members with names, phone numbers and addresses. ■



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

TASK LIST, TIMELINE & FOLLOW-UP

You've got a list of tactics, you've set priorities. Who will do the research, produce materials and obtain resources, plan the actions? Make a list of each individual task, **who** will do it and by **when**. Put these tasks and the dates of public meetings, hearings, meetings (of your group and of allies and opponents), and important local events (county fairs, elections) on a calendar.

Then comes the most important part. The best planned campaign will fail if it sits in a file. Get out the map and see where you are. A campaign coordinator or committee should check to see that tasks are done on time.

A campaign outline is not etched in stone. If you run into highway construction, you need to draw a new route on the road map. Review the campaign regularly and adjust it. What did you find out in your research? How does that affect your objectives or the actions you have planned? How did the decision-maker respond to your demand? Is the budget you planned adequate? You should always have a list of questions like this in a big campaign.



Effective non-profit organizations do strategic planning very much like this. Successful private businesses and corporations do, too. In fact, it's almost certain your opponents and the decision makers on your issue have a strategic plan. What would your strategy be if you were in the shoes of your opponents or the decision maker? How can your group counter this strategy?

You **can** win changes you care about for your community – **if** you develop a better plan and do a **better** job of carrying it out.

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FOR MORE ON WINNING STRATEGIES:

Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by WORC.

Strategy: The Fundamentals and Choosing Tactics in the October 1999 and January 2000 issues of *virginia.organizing*, the newsletter of the Virginia Organizing Project. Available on the web at www.virginia-organizing.org/toolbox.php.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – www.worc.org. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

