

# HOW TO Take Action



## WHAT IS AN ACTION?

**Actions** are campaign steps that pressure a **decision maker** (someone with power) to meet your **demands** (what you want). These activities are actions if you use them to press a campaign demand:

- Accountability session (meeting with a decision maker)
- Rally, march, picket, sit-in, strike, boycott
- Shareholder resolutions
- Coordinated letter-writing, phone trees and calls or a "fax attack"
- Petition drive
- Media event (announcing a campaign, demands, new allies, or new information supporting your position)
- Organized testimony at a public hearing

## WHAT IS A CAMPAIGN?

A **campaign** is your plan to win on an issue. A good campaign starts with clear **goals and objectives** describing what you want. It identifies **decision makers** and your **allies** and **opponents** – who's with you, who's against you. It shows the **resources and information** you need to carry out the campaign.

It lists **tactics**. **Actions** are tactics that involve pressing demands on a decision maker. **Activities** are all the other things to do: producing fact sheets, planning strategy, meeting with allies, and so on.

## TAKE ACTION

*Hundreds of people rally at the state capitol against a bill to weaken environmental laws. Citizens go door to door with a petition against a proposed toxic dump. A group meets with the mayor to demand more affordable housing. Dozens of farmers turn the foreclosure of a neighbor's farm into a "penny auction," disrupting the sale to save the farm.*

These are *actions*: tactics by a group to get someone with power to do something the group wants. Actions are visible, critical parts of the strategy community groups follow to win on issues.



## WHY DO ACTIONS?

Actions are the most important part of any issue campaign. You can't win unless you demand something from a decision maker. You have to present your ideas to those who can change things, and get a response.

Issue campaigns involve a lot of work and a lot of activity other than actions. You have to dig up information, meet with allies, raise money, and do a hundred other things. Without well-planned and well-executed actions, though, all this work won't get you what you want.

That's why one sign of a strong community organization is how well and how often it takes action. Groups that only *talk to each other*, no matter how good their ideas, will never win anything. Groups that never win become demoralized. Eventually they turn into social clubs or debating societies, or they simply die.

Actions advance your campaign. A good campaign has a *series* of actions which increase pressure on the decision maker, step by step, until he or she concludes that the easiest course is to give you what you want.

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD ACTION?

Actions should be *winnable*. This doesn't mean you have to win everything in one action. You may be trying to win only one out of several campaign demands. You may be trying to get someone to confirm he or she is the decision maker. You may want someone to take a position – any position – on the record. You want to get something out of the action, whatever that something is.

Good actions often *surprise* the decision maker. If you get the decision maker off balance you may be more successful than if he or she is on familiar ground. Sometimes you want to make decision-makers uncomfortable; by agreeing with you they can be comfortable again. In other cases, making decision makers uncomfortable will only increase their resistance.

Surprise decision makers with your power – with unexpected allies or endorsements, with numbers, with the strength of people's feelings about the issue. Many things about an action can be surprising: where you hold it, who comes to it, the clothes you wear, the things you do and say.

A good action should be *fun*. It's easier to get people to come to an action that looks like it will be fun and important. Sometimes you want to poke a little fun during the action. Former Interior Secretary James Watt once said the most memorable demonstration against his anti-environmental policies was a conservation group's "21 chain saw salute" outside a meeting where he was speaking.

Good actions *involve many people*. A big crowd shows support for your position and the power of your group. A larger than expected crowd can surprise the decision maker and make it harder for him or her to dismiss you with empty promises or weak excuses.

A good action *develops skills and increases the members' understanding* of the issue. They have the chance to develop leadership skills such as getting a clear message to the news media, public speaking, negotiating, doing research, planning and evaluation.

A good action *unites the group*. Doing an exciting, important action together is a unifying experience. Poorly conceived or badly planned actions can be divisive. Some of your members or allies may think a tactic is either too timid, or too extreme. Or you may not all agree on exactly what you want out of an action.

Plan your actions to build unity. If you involve many people in planning actions, you'll get more and better ideas and a broader sense of ownership in your action.

Wear buttons or hats which display your demands or a central message. Singing or chanting at a rally builds unity and helps get your message across to the news media. Radio and TV reporters need sound and action for their stories; just standing around watching a speaker can be boring.

## SURPRISE!

Members of the McCone Agricultural Protection Organization ("MAPO"), an affiliate of the Northern Plains Resource Council, had a problem with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM, part of the Interior Department, decides where and when to lease federal coal to coal companies. Someone had "nominated" federal coal under their private land, the first step towards strip mining. MAPO wanted to

know the names of the coal companies, speculators – and, they suspected, some of their neighbors – who wanted to strip mine their farms and ranches. But the BLM refused to reveal the names of the "nominators."

MAPO's leaders called the local BLM office to set up a meeting. They told the District Manager some of their members wanted to talk to him, but didn't say how

many. When fifty adults, children, pets and a local reporter arrived at the BLM office a few days later, the District Manager was so shaken that he lit and smoked two cigarettes at the same time.

Eventually, MAPO got most of the information they wanted. Ten years later, the BLM employees who were there that day - or who heard about it - still remembered the action and the power it showed.

## PLANNING AN ACTION

A big action takes a lot of planning. The first step is to ask, "What do we want out of the action?" Think of two kinds of objectives:

- Specific concerns and demands to raise with the decision maker.
- Group-building objectives: how many members you want at the action, the new leaders who will run it, the kind of media coverage you want for your group.

Then ask – "How will we get what we want? How will we carry out this action to accomplish these objectives?"

An action is a high profile event for your group, and for

your campaign. If you cover every angle ahead of time, you are more likely to get what you want, move your campaign, and build the energy, morale and power of your organization.

Anticipate everything that might happen at the action. If the decision maker will be there, plan for everything he or she might do.



## WHAT TO DO WITH A PETITION

Residents of Underwood, North Dakota, got mad when their water began turning black. They suspected that coal mining was damaging the town's source of groundwater. The City Commission was considering an expensive new system to pipe water from another town. Residents organized by the Dakota Resource Council circulated a petition opposing this taxpayer-funded solution and asking that the coal company be held responsible.

After a couple hundred of Underwood's 1,000 residents had signed the petition, forty people took it to the next City Commission meeting. The pressure forced the Commission do two things it hadn't planned: it investigated its rights under state coal mining laws to force the mine to replace the water supply, and it hired a consulting firm to develop a better management plan for the existing water supply to minimize problems in the short term.

A petition can be powerful when, as in Underwood, it represents many voters and when the petitioners present it to a decision maker in an effective action. A petition is also a good list of prospective members for a membership drive. Citizens in Underwood used their petition to develop the membership base for a new Dakota Resource Council chapter.

## HAVE FUN WITH IT

The Western Colorado Congress (WCC) had been fighting for cleaner air on Colorado's Western Slope for many years. State Health Department officials had told them many times, "We don't have enough resources to enforce air quality laws as strictly as you citizens want." WCC members were tired of that excuse and tired of breathing dirty air.

So they held a bake sale on the steps of the County Courthouse to "raise money" so the Department could enforce the law. This action, "Cookies for Clean Air," drew media attention because it made fun of the agency and its excuses, and dramatized the groups' demand that the agency spend more time and money on enforcement.

## AFTER THE ACTION...

Always evaluate an action, as soon as possible. While everyone's memory is still fresh, learn from the action, agree on what happened, and plan follow-up steps.

Questions to talk about:

- What did we win?*
- Did we keep control of the action? How?*
- What was the most effective part of the action, and why?*
- Did we follow our game plan?*
- Were we united?*
- Do we feel good about the action?*
- What are our next steps?*

Sometimes the real action happens *after* the action. Members of the Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wheatland, Wyoming, went to the town council meeting a few years ago. The Council was planning to expand an airport runway, mostly for a big company's private jet, at the expense of taxpayers and neighboring landowners. The Council was rude to the citizens and ignored their opinions. The Council even adjourned the public meeting, met in secret, and returned to announce its decision to build the runway.

The citizens went out to the parking lot hopping mad. They decided that everyone in town should know how the Town Council operated. They wrote up the script of a thirty-second radio commercial and passed a hat to collect money to buy air time on the spot. They recorded a commercial the next day and put it on the only radio station in town. It began, "Have you ever gone to a Wheatland Town Council meeting? We have..." The ad described what happened and then said, "If you don't think that's right, call the Town Council. Here's the number." The Council members heard the message. After a long delay, they changed the runway plan to meet several of the group's demands.

## PLANNING PAYS OFF

The Brookings County chapter of Dakota Rural Action (DRA) in South Dakota helped defeat a large, corporate feedlot by painstakingly planning for a County Zoning Commission meeting. The Commission held the meeting to consider the feedlot's request for a special exception from zoning regulations.

The chapter began planning as soon as the meeting was scheduled. It had three meetings just to plan the action. Each member of the planning committee invited five people to the action. They helped pass a petition which 85% of the landowners around the proposed site signed. They decided all of the points to make, who would make each point and in what order. They ran several practice sessions. They planned rebuttal arguments and answers to questions they might be asked.

They recruited allies to the meeting. They planned responses to compromises the feedlot or the Commission might offer. They researched the zoning laws and found out it would take a three-fourths vote to approve the exception. They met with each commissioner to find out where the votes were. They sent a press release and background packets to the media.

They found out when the building opened and the rules by which the Commission would run the meeting. Members showed up an hour early—spreading out to save seats for late-arriving supporters and to keep blocks of feedlot supporters from sitting together.

Everyone had a role at the action. One person's job was to start the clapping after each member spoke, which kept up the spirit of the action when the Chair tried to shut down applause.

The room was packed with 200 people, most of them DRA supporters. In the end, three commissioners voted against the exception—just enough to kill the feedlot.

# THE CHECKLIST

Develop a checklist of everything you need to do before the action. Check and double-check your planning. Here are some items for a checklist for almost any action:



- Describe the action clearly.
- State the objectives (desired and expected results) of the action.
- Name the decision maker(s) (targets) of the action.
- List the demands to present to the decision maker.
- Confirm the date, time and location of the action.
- Prepare an agenda for the action (what will happen at the action, in what order).
- Prepare a media plan (how you will get your message out). Who is the audience you want to see or hear about the action? If you want reporters and TV cameras at the action, what will make them want to cover it? What can you do to make your message central to their coverage?
- Set a turnout goal (the number of participants you want). Name the local chapters or committees in your organization and allies who will help out.
- Develop a turnout plan (how you will get people to participate). How many flyers and posters will you print, and how will you distribute them? Who will call whom and when? What doors will you knock on? Will you pass a petition to get names of people to invite?
- Define roles of members and leaders in the action. Who will speak for the group? Who will negotiate? Does everyone know his or her role?
- List research and materials you need for the action. (Who's making the signs? Who's bringing the song sheets and the sound system?)
- Develop a budget and fundraising plan.
- List the meetings you'll have to plan and role play (practice). Be specific about the purpose of each meeting and who needs to be there. At the last meeting, walk through the whole action.
- Anticipate responses by your opponents and the decision maker to the action and to your demands.
- "What-ifs": Plan for all the potential problems you might have in pulling off the action.
- Schedule an evaluation and start a follow-up plan.
- Assign responsibilities and deadlines for all the tasks needed to pull off the action.



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

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#### FOR MORE ON ACTIONS:

**How to Develop a Winning Strategy** is another topic available in this series of guides to community organizing.

**How to Run a Good Meeting** and **How to Speak in Public** are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

#### MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

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Topics are listed on our website – [www.worc.org](http://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.

