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Problems Are Different from Issues

In direct action organizing, there is a difference between an issue and a problem. A *problem* is a broad area of concern. For example, unaffordable healthcare, pollution, racism, and unemployment are all problems. An *issue* is a solution or partial solution to a problem. National healthcare, green energy, affirmative action, and a federal jobs program are all issues.

Defining a Solution to the Problem

Because direct action organizing is about winning issues, the first step is to analyze the problem and decide what kind of solution to work toward. Some people have the luxury of choosing the problems on which they work. For others, the problem chooses them and can't be avoided no matter how long or difficult the effort. Drugs, an oil spill, or racial discrimination are examples of problems that choose people. In both cases, however, organizations and individuals must still choose the issue. That is, they must define the solution to the problem.

Many approaches can be taken to solving any problem, and the implications of each must be thought through carefully. It isn't enough to ask

Choosing an Issue

which is the most far-reaching solution (or for that matter, which is the most serious problem).

Cutting the Issue

Equally as important is "cutting the issue," that is, deciding how to frame the issue in a way that will gain the most support. For example, an organization was working to get the city to build more low-income housing. The group members realized that if they demanded housing only for people with the greatest need, those with the lowest incomes, they couldn't gain the necessary political support. Instead, they spoke of "affordable" housing and wrote their proposed bill to benefit lower wage working people in addition to the poor. Because the construction would create many jobs, some of which could go to community people, they called their campaign the "Affordable Housing and Jobs Campaign." They won \$750 million for housing over five years, which represented a 50 percent increase. Money was targeted for very low income families. The program was so successful that the Mayor proposed a five-year extension.

An organization in a conservative farm state was working for a program to foster the development of electricity from wind power. Its

members could have spoken of this as a purely environmental issue stressing the air quality benefits of burning less coal. However, other groups had tried and had not made progress on that basis. Instead, the organization talked about the economic benefits of using a native resource, wind, instead of importing out-of-state coal. They said that the money spent on importing coal should be kept in the local economy, and they highlighted the advantages to farmers of being able to rent out their land for wind turbines. The first commercial wind turbines in the state are now in operation.

An organization was working to have a vast tract of timberland converted into a national park. The issue was cut as one of restoring the woods to their former beauty, but much of the local population sided with the timber companies against the environmentalists. Had the organization been more sensitive to people's fear of job loss, they could have shown that the cutting practices of the timber companies would inevitably lead to the end of both the sawmill and logging jobs, whereas a national park would create a whole new tourist industry. What's more, the park could be developed in stages so that those currently employed in logging could remain so for many years.

The Impact of the Issue on the Organization

The organizational implications of any approach must be carefully thought through. To put it another way, think organizationally. Ask: What impact will taking up this issue have on our organization? What will happen to the organization if we ignore the problem? Don't think only about problems and solutions.

The ability of leaders to think *organizationally* in addition to thinking about *issues* is a major factor in the group's development. It is also a major cause of internal friction between members who come at things from these two different directions. In general, new members are attracted to an organization because of the issues and are not particularly conscious of the structure and mechanics of organizing. One volunteer in a neighborhood organization, after three months of faithfully coming twice a week to the office to make phone calls, looked up and asked, "What did you say the name of this group was?" She was probably asked the question by someone on the phone, but it was nonetheless the first step toward thinking organizationally.

Members who think only about issues are often frustrated by the amount of time and effort that goes into organizational maintenance. Occasionally you will hear leaders accused of being "empire builders." While that may be the case, more often they are organization builders being criticized by someone who hasn't yet learned to value organization. An organization is able to win victory after victory, to protect victories already won from being taken away, and to build political power so that winning becomes easier. Building an organization and winning issues are two interdependent sides of the same process.

It is necessary to consider the impact of the issue on the organization separately from the

social value of the issue itself. For any given organization at a particular stage in its development, some issues will be better for organizational development and more winnable than others. For example, a group trying to get a progressive income tax law through the state legislature found that it lacked a sufficient base in the legislative districts to pass the bill. It put the state bill temporarily on hold and, in order to build local committees, shifted to more winnable city and county tax issues. This detour, while necessary, created two challenges. The members who joined to work for the state bill had to be reoriented to a local issue, and, in the future, people who joined because of their interest in the local issues will have to be refocused on the state bill. This example also shows how the choice of issue can change the nature of the organization.

Evaluating Issues

The following checklist is an aid for evaluating issues. We recommend that before a group starts to choose among issues, the members be asked, "What are the criteria for a good issue for our organization?" List what people say on a blackboard or large sheet of paper and try to develop a mutually agreed upon list similar to this one. The choice of an issue will be made much easier, and it will be a sounder choice as well.

A good issue is one that matches most of these criteria. The issue should

1. Result in a Real Improvement in People's Lives

If you can see and feel the improvement, then you can be sure that it has actually been won. For example, a transit rider organization won a commitment for more frequent equipment inspections. Perhaps this led to improved service over a period of years but

perhaps not. Riders could not tell. On the other hand, when the group asked for and won printed train schedules, they had a visible victory and also a performance standard to which they could hold the Transit Authority accountable.

2. Give People a Sense of Their Own Power

People should come away from the campaign feeling that the victory was won by them, not by experts, lawyers, or politicians. This builds both their confidence to take on larger issues and their loyalty to the organization. The word "empowerment" is often used in this context, but actually it implies a different concept. Empowerment implies giving people power, but only someone very powerful, surely not an organizer, has power to give away. Citizens either have power in a particular situation or they don't. If they do, they can be made aware of it. If they don't, they can be shown how to gain it. It is very rarely given to them.

3. Alter the Relations of Power

Power relations between citizens and decision makers can be changed in three ways:

- Building a strong, ongoing staffed organization to create a new center of power that changes the way the other side makes decisions.
- Changing laws and regulations in ways that increase our power or diminish that of the other side.
- Electing people to office who support our positions.

4. Be Worthwhile

Members should feel that they are fighting for something about which they feel good and that merits the effort. It is better to end

the campaign having won less than you wanted than to scale back your demands from the start and ask for too little. Groups often make this mistake in the name of "realism" when they depend on the advice of professional lobbyists or elected officials who know how to measure the legislative support for a particular measure but don't understand the ability of grassroots pressure to change the picture.

5. Be Winnable

The problem must not be so large or the solution so remote that the organization is overwhelmed. The members must be able to see from the start that they have a good chance of winning, or at least a good strategy exists for winning. Ask who else has won on a similar issue and how. Then call on people with experience and ask for advice. Ask what their strategy was, not just what they did.

It is useful to figure out how much money your victory will cost the people on the other side. Will their additional non-monetary costs make them want to hold out against you? This gives you an idea of how hard they will work to defeat you and how much money they are likely to spend.

6. Be Widely Felt

Many people must feel that this is a real problem and must agree with your solution. It is not enough that a few people feel strongly about it.

7. Be Deeply Felt

Some people must not only agree with you but feel strongly enough to do something about it. It is not enough that many people agree about the issue if none feel strongly.

8. Be Easy to Understand

It is preferable that you don't have to convince people that the problem exists, that your solution is good, and that they want to help win it. However, such convincing is sometimes necessary, particularly with those environmental issues where the source of the problem can't be seen or smelled, or with economic problems where the basic cause is not always obvious. In general, a good issue does not require a lengthy and difficult explanation. One should simply be able to say something like "Look at all those dead fish floating in the water. That didn't happen before the chemical plant opened."

9. Have a Clear Target—Decision Maker

The target, or decision maker as he or she is often called, is the person who can give you what you want. A more difficult campaign usually requires several clear targets. This allows the campaign a longer time to build up strength, even if some of the targets refuse your demands in the early months. If you can't figure out who the decision maker is, either you don't have the right issue or you may be addressing a problem, not an issue. Remember that the decision maker is always a person or a number of people, such as the Mayor, not an institution, corporation, or elected body. The public is never the target. The Mayor, not the public, can give what you want.

10. Have a Clear Time Frame That Works for You

An issue campaign has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You should have an idea of the approximate dates on which those points will fall.

Some key dates for events are *internal*, that is, set by your organization. Some are *external*, set by someone else. The timetable of a campaign to win legislation is almost entirely external, as is the timetable of an election. The timetable for a campaign to get a stop sign in your community is almost totally internal.

Do the dates of major efforts in your campaign fall at particularly difficult parts of the year, such as mid-August or Christmas week? The spring and fall are best for most groups in most places.

Even if your organization does not have specific electoral goals, you want the time frame to fit the electoral calendar. You usually have more power just before an election than just after one. Consider how the issue's timetable can be aligned with the electoral timetable.

11. Be Non-Divisive

Avoid issues that divide your present constituency. Don't pit neighbor against neighbor, old against young, race against race. Don't be content to get traffic or the local drug pusher off your block and onto the next block. (This is not just being "liberal"; both will soon be back on your doorstep.)

Look down the road several years. Whom will you eventually need to bring into your organization? Will this issue help or hinder you in reaching them?

12. Build Leadership

The campaign should have many roles that people can play. Issue campaigns that meet most of the other criteria also build leadership if they are planned to do so. In a coalition organization, building leadership has a different meaning than in a neighborhood group because the people who

represent organizations in the coalition already are leaders. They don't need or want you to develop them. Often, however, they do need to learn to work with each other, to use direct action, and to align electoral and issue campaigns where appropriate.

13. Set Up Your Organization for the Next Campaign

A campaign requiring employers to provide health insurance leads to new campaigns on other health issues or employee benefits. On the other hand, a campaign to make the city catch stray dogs generally leads only to catching stray dogs. People who have problems paying for healthcare are likely to have other economic problems in common. People whose link to each other is a dislike of stray dogs may not have a second issue in common and will fall to arguing when the dogs are gone.

In addition to thinking about future issue directions, consider the skills the group will develop in the campaign and the contacts it will make for the next one.

14. Have a Pocketbook Angle

Issues that gain people money or save people money are usually widely and deeply felt.

15. Raise Money

One big test of an issue is whether your constituents will contribute to the campaign. Also ask, What problem is the hot item in the foundation world? It changes almost from year to year.

16. Be Consistent with Your Values and Vision

The issues we choose to work on must reflect our values and our vision. For example, we do want less crime, but is an endlessly increasing number of police and prisons the direction in which we want our society to go?

In addition to these, you may very well have organization-specific criteria. For example, if your area has many new Latino residents who are not represented in your organization, one criterion may be that the issue have strong appeal to the Latino community.

After developing your list of criteria, review the issues under consideration. Some issues will drop from the list very quickly. For the remaining two or three, indicate whether each criterion has a high, medium, or low application to the issue. Then, take a vote. Of course you can always work on the second most popular issue after you win the first, but if the vote is close, more discussion may be needed to avoid splitting the group. In general, at least two-thirds of the group needs to be enthusiastic about any issue chosen.

Checklist for Choosing an Issue

A good issue is one that matches most of these criteria. Use this checklist to compare issues, or develop your own criteria and chart for choosing an issue.

| Issue 1 | Issue 2 | Issue 3 | Will the Issue |
|---------|---------|---------|---|
| | | | 1. Result in a real improvement in people's lives? |
| | | | 2. Give people a sense of their own power? |
| | | | 3. Alter the relations of power? |
| | | | 4. Be worthwhile? |
| | | | 5. Be winnable? |
| | | | 6. Be widely felt? |
| | | | 7. Be deeply felt? |
| | | | 8. Be easy to understand? |
| | | | 9. Have a clear target? |
| | | | 10. Have a clear time frame that works for you? |
| | | | 11. Be non-divisive? |
| | | | 12. Build leadership? |
| | | | 13. Set your organization up for the next campaign? |
| | | | 14. Have a pocketbook angle? |
| | | | 15. Raise money? |
| | | | 16. Be consistent with your values and vision? |

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