The Basics of Grassroots Organizing

As you begin the task of organizing...[around local community issues such as stopping] dioxin exposure, you may be an experienced activist, or a newcomer to local campaigns to protect community health and environment. You may be an individual who is seeking to organize a group, or you may be a member of an already existing group that is seeking to expand or join with other groups to form a coalition. You may live in a community where the...[source of the problem] is obvious, or you may not. In all of these cases, the same organizing basics will be necessary for a successful...campaign. This chapter will discuss twelve basic organizing principles.

1. Talk and listen.
2. Figure out who you should talk and listen to first.
3. Create and distribute fact sheets.
4. Recruit new members.
5. Conduct meetings.
6. Create an organizational structure.
7. Set goals.
8. Identify targets.
9. Conduct research.
10. Take direct action.
11. Target the media.
12. Use laws and science to support organizing.

Organizing Principle One: You Talk and You Listen

Three young organizers took a long drive through rural California to meet famed farmworker organizer Cesar Chavez. After their hard and dusty journey, they asked Chavez, “Cesar, how do you organize?” Chavez replied, “Well, first you talk to one person, then you talk to another per-
son, then you talk to another person.” “Yes,” they responded impatiently, “but how do you organize?” Cesar repeated his answer. “First you talk to one person, then you talk to another, then you talk to another.”

If you are one, two, or three individuals without an organization, your next step is to talk to others so you can build an organization. If you already are part of an organization, then your next step is to talk to the people in your organization about initiating a local . . . campaign [to bring about the change you desire].

To build the relationships that will hold an organization or a coalition together you must meet and talk with people, one or two at a time. Talking with people doesn't mean giving people a speech and waiting for their applause. Talking with people means listening to their stories, paying attention to their reactions to what you've told them about . . . [your issue], finding out what connects . . . [your] issue to their own past experiences and future aspirations, and noting the other issues they may bring up in the course of the conversation.

I was invited to help an organization in upstate New York that was fighting a solid waste incinerator. Except for them, the group members told me, no one else in their community was interested in the issue. When I asked how much listening the group members did to connect their incinerator fight to other issues people cared about, they said they listened a lot. But in a role play on recruitment, they talked at me without ever learning who I was or what I cared about.

That evening, in a bar, I was challenged by the group to show them how to recruit a truck driver who was having a beer and watching television.

Accepting the challenge, I sat next to the truck driver and told him about the group's goals. He was clearly uninterested in working to stop the incinerator. I then asked him what he did care about locally, and what he would change if he had the power to do so. I listened for ten minutes while he talked about potholes and how costly his truck maintenance was because of them. When I collected enough information to feel comfortable, I asked him how bad he thought the potholes would get when hundreds of trucks carrying tons of garbage used those same streets each and every day. He joined the group because I listened to him and identified what he cared about and tied it into the local issue.

People get involved when they feel that they have a self-interest in getting involved, and that by getting involved they can effectively act on that self-interest. If you are prepared to listen to people to identify what they are about, and discuss “pocketbook” issues and “nuisance” problems as well as health and environmental concerns, you should be able to appeal to almost everyone's self-interest, then you have to convince that person of the ability of your group or coalition to tackle the issue and win.

**ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE TWO: Figure Out Who You Should Talk and Listen to First**

Organizing a community around issues like dioxin poisoning has great potential for broad participation. But you need to figure out who you are going to talk with first. Who are the people most directly affected in your community? Who are the people for whom you are the best recruiter?

At Love Canal, these were easy questions to answer. I needed to talk to the other people who lived around the canal. They were my neighbors, so I was an appropriate recruiter. They were also the people most affected.

You can work out the answers to
• breast-feeding mothers and their families, and advocates of breast-feeding;
• cancer survivors and their families;
• nurses and physicians;
• people who have experienced infertility and their families;
• children with birth defects and their families;
• farmers and farmworkers who use pesticides;
• home builders and real estate sales people;
• grocery and health food store owners;
• dairy farms and their families;
• firefighters and their families;
• cattle ranchers and their families;
• fishers and their families;
• parent-teacher associations;
• environmental and conservation groups;
• junior and senior high school environmental clubs;
• Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

To identify and contact these kinds of groups in your community, it may help to look at local organizations listed in the Yellow Pages or in resource books produced by the United Way or the Chamber of Commerce.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE THREE: Create and Distribute Fact Sheets

After you’ve . . . [researched your issue], talked to some people, and decided to start a local campaign . . . [around an issue such as] dioxin exposure, your next step is to create a fact sheet. An attractive, easy-to-read, and accurate fact sheet educates the community about the problem of dioxin and ties the issue into their lives. If community members think they are directly affected, they will be likely to join you in your efforts to shut down the sources of dioxin. An effective way to generate community interest is to present the . . . problem broadly, so that it applies to as many people as possible.

A simple, one-page fact sheet will serve the purpose. [For example, concerning the issue of dioxin poisoning] you might include:
• the names of the authors and/or your group name, address, and telephone number;
• what dioxin is, where it comes from, and how it accumulates in the body;

FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE. SENDING A LETTER OR PLACING A CALL IS GENERALLY NOT ENOUGH TO WIN SOMEONE’S SUPPORT FOR OR PARTICIPATION IN YOUR EFFORTS. FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHER INDIVIDUALS IS THE WAY YOU GET THEM TO ATTEND THEIR FIRST MEETING OR TO GET THEM TO JOIN A COALITION.

• how the community gets exposed to dioxin and dioxin-like chemicals;
• types of health effects that may result from exposure to these chemicals; and
• how dioxin is affecting businesses and property values.

If you already know the local sources of dioxin, you can add:
• where the local dioxin sources are located; and
• who owns the local dioxin sources or who originally contaminated the area with dioxin.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOUR: RECRUIT MILLIONS, ONE AT A TIME

Direct contact with people is the basic building block of organizing. If you don’t yet have a group, you need to go person-to-person and meeting-to-meeting in order to build one. If you’ve already got a group, you need to go person-to-person and meeting-to-meeting in order to build a coalition. As you go person-to-person, people will give you a lot of information. You will get a good idea of the magnitude of the interest in the issue in the community, and you will find other ways to connect to the community’s self-interest.

Face-to-face conversations make the difference. If you are building a group, face-to-face conversations with other individuals is the way you get them to attend their first meeting. If you are building a coalition, face-to-face conversations with individuals representing groups is the way to get them to join the coalition. Sending a letter to invite someone to a meeting, or placing a call to leave a message about your meeting, is generally not enough to win someone’s support for or participation in your efforts.

All recruiting is a form of door-knocking. If you are trying to organize a neighborhood, the doors line the streets. If you are trying to build a different kind of group or coalition, the doors may be spread all over town and you may need appointments to open them.

Before you try to recruit someone, you have to decide what kind of support you are asking for. Do you want the person to come to a planning meeting? Do you want the person to invite you to talk to his or her group’s membership? Do you want the person to recruit his or her group or neighborhood into your coalition?

When I first decided to go door-to-door to talk with my neighbors about Love Canal, I was scared to death. As I approached the first door, I was sure that the person who
Answered would slam the door in my face. Or that the people who lived in that house would think that I was crazy or just causing trouble. I thought, “Who am I to talk to people about a dumpsite and my sick kids?” I was a high school graduate and a full-time home-maker. The closer I got to the first house, the more frightened I became. When I finally did reach the door, I knocked so lightly that no one heard the knock, not even the dog. I ran home feeling ill, and frustrated that someone more skilled than I wasn’t knocking on my door.

When my son was admitted to the hospital for a second time, my fear and anger turned into action. I realized, while watching him sleep in the hospital bed, that I was now partly responsible for him being there. As a parent who took her responsibilities seriously, I realized that my fear of a stranger’s door was overriding my responsibility to protect my child. When my son was well again I went back to that first house and knocked hard enough to make the dog bark.

As I went from door to door, I found that no one slammed the door in my face. In fact, most people were friendly and openly gave me information and volunteered to help. It turned out that many of my neighbors were hoping, like me, that someone skilled would one day knock on their door.

There are several ways you can make knocking on doors easier.

- **First**, organize what you are going to say. You need to put together a “rap” to use at the door. Successful professionals who canvass for money start their rap with, “I am . . .” “We are . . .” “This is . . .” “We want . . .”

  [Again, using the issue of dioxin,] here’s how you can use the same approach:

  “I am . . . your name.

  “We are . . . a small group of parents who are concerned about dioxin.

  “This is . . . a fact sheet or petition about the dioxin problem.

  “We want . . . you to attend a small meeting next Tuesday at our local fire hall to discuss our concerns about this dioxin problem and what we can do together as a community.

  Once you have memorized your “rap,” practice it in front of a mirror or try it out on your family or friends.

- **Second**, write down all the information people give you in order to avoid future confusion over who said what and who made what commitments.

  When you knock on a new person’s door, there are those awkward first few seconds when he or she is deciding whether or not to slam the door and go on with the business of life. Your opening has to be clear, straightforward, and appealing. The person will be wondering who you are, where you come from, what you want, and how much what you are asking for is going to cost them. Think about your own experiences with people coming to your door. What makes you decide to talk to them? What makes you decide to close your door?

  The questions of who you are, and whether you are connected to anyone the person knows, are credibility questions a good organizer will work out in advance. If you can say, “I was just talking to your neighbor, Mrs. Jones, and she said you’d be a good person to talk to,” or “Reverend Smith is working with us—he’s letting us use the church basement for our meeting next week,” you have borrowed credibility and will have a few more seconds to get in the door and on with your rap.

  Whether you are selling brushes or anti-dioxin campaigns, the time comes when you have to close the sale. In organizing, the sale is a commitment from the person to do something. Use your judgment to gauge what the person can afford to do, and remember that everyone can do something. Commitment should be expressed as action. “I believe” should flow directly into “I will do.” Just signing the petition is probably too easy. So is making a half-hearted

- **Third**, before you start, select a date and find a place to meet with those who want to discuss the problem. Create a flyer listing the time and place of the meeting, or simply add the information to your fact sheet.

- **Fourth**, consider circulating a petition. You don’t need a lawyer to write the petition. You just need to write something simple. For example: “We the undersigned residents of Our Town, U.S.A., petition the local/state government body/Chemikill Industries to test the area/explore other ways to manage dioxin-contaminated wastes.” The purpose of the petition is two-fold: to get the names and addresses of community supporters whom you can later contact, and to show community support to those in power.

Be fore you leave, the new person should know how happy you are with the meeting and, more importantly, how essential he or she is to building the organization. Never forget to say thank you.

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promise to come to the meeting. Try to get a firm commitment to attend the meeting. Explore other ways that the person can become actively involved. Ask for other contacts. Invite the person to knock on doors with you or to make two to five contacts. Make sure the person knows you’ll be in touch to see how things went. End the visit when you are sure you and the new person have a clear and concrete understanding about the deal—about how many people the person will contact and how many he or she will commit to bringing to the next meeting.

Before you leave, the new person should know how happy you are with the meeting and, more importantly, how essential he or she is to building the organization. Never forget to say thank you.

If your door-knocking is not door-to-door but all over town, the same basic principles apply. But you will probably need an appointment to knock on those doors. People are more likely to agree to set up an appointment if they know the person who is asking for their time. So if you don’t know the person you want to talk to face-to-face, try to find someone who does. Ask this person to make the appointment for the two of you and go together.

**Organizing Principle Five:**
**Hold Meetings That Make People Want to Come Back and Bring Their Friends**

According to Tim Sampson, a long-time teacher of community organizing, people will come to a meeting if:

- they have made a commitment to come,
- they have a role or responsibility in the meeting,
- they have an immediate and specific self-interest in the work of the organization, and they have past, positive experiences with similar meetings.

To have a successful meeting, your recruitment efforts must satisfy the first and third of Sampson’s conditions. The second and fourth condition will depend on how you run the meeting. Use different kinds of meetings to suit different purposes.

**House Meetings**

This is the kind of meeting many groups hold when they are first forming. The meeting is held at a members home and the style is informal. One of the biggest benefits of this kind of meeting is the greater comfort level among members.

A good house meeting should last about ninety minutes and have a three-part agenda, with each part taking half an hour. “What is the problem we’re facing” is the first part. “What can we do about this problem” is the second. In the third half-hour, you figure out what exactly needs to be done before the next meeting, and who will do what.

Holding house meetings in different locations throughout the neighborhood is a good way to start establishing a community organization. Rotating facilitators of house meetings is a good way to help identify and build leadership skills in your organization.

**Planning Meetings**

Before your organization holds a general membership meeting or makes any major decisions, you should hold a planning meeting. Leaders and other key decision-makers within the organization get together at the planning meeting to set agendas, review the work that has been done, and plan activities. When things go wrong in a campaign, nine out of ten times the cause is either poor planning or no planning.

The setting for a planning meeting is less important than the people who are invited to attend. If your organization hasn’t set rules on who attends such meetings, think about who needs to come in order to make the activity you’re planning a success. Some people should be invited because you can count on their good ideas; others should be invited because their participation gives them a positive role in the process and a sense of ownership. One important addendum is to consider those who may cause trouble if they are not involved in the planning process. You will have to decide whether you want to deal with these people in advance, at the planning meeting, or later, when they raise a ruckus.

Planning meetings should not be decision-making meetings. Instead, planning meetings should establish the agenda and a process by which decisions will be made at a general membership meeting, or should define a plan to carry out an activity that has already been decided upon by the membership.

Groups sometimes use planning meetings to make decisions on behalf of the membership. The general meeting then becomes the place where those decisions are announced and ratified. These groups are not practicing democracy. We all know what it’s like when the government or a corporation tells us what they plan to do without our consent or permission. Why would we want to replicate the same actions we are fighting against?

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GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

Most organizations need to hold regular membership meetings. These ensure that all members of the organization share the responsibility for decision-making and for carrying out the activities of the organization. These meetings, however, are the hardest to carry out in a lively and productive way.

General membership meetings should always start with an agenda. The highlights of that agenda should be shared with everyone who is asked to attend. The time and location of the meeting should be chosen to accommodate the maximum number of people. Watch for time conflicts with work schedules, religious, sports or community events, popular television programming, and other previously scheduled events.

Running a good general membership meeting requires good instincts and common sense. You will also need a good sense of balance in order to do the following:

• Make the meeting fun and sociable without seeming silly or frivolous.
• Make the meeting orderly but not stiff.
• Allow everyone to have their say while avoiding long, repetitive speeches.
• Make sure decisions get made efficiently without jamming them down people’s throats.
• End the meeting on time while covering all key items in the agenda.

Good planning and shared responsibility are probably the best ways to ensure the proper balance on these matters. The best way to measure your success in holding meetings is by counting how many people come back.

People will come to the next meeting if they enjoyed the first one, if it started and ended on time and wasn’t a bore, if it produced concrete results, if it was lively and exciting, and if it delivered what was promised.

Another simple but crucial point: People come to the next meeting only if they know when and where it is. At every meeting, you should announce the date for the next meeting and hand out flyers for people to hang on their refrigerators as reminders. You should also pass out a sign-up sheet to get peoples’ names and telephone numbers so they can be called and reminded of the next meeting or be updated on recent developments on the issue, or contacted for follow-up calls.

The structure of your organization should help encourage people to join, get active, and stay active. People quit when they feel useless. They also sometimes quit if they are asked to do things that either are too much for them to handle or are too vague or undirected.

No matter what kind of meeting you hold, you should follow up with everyone who attended. This is one reason why you need a sign-up sheet for attendance. By following up, you guarantee that everyone has a common understanding of what happened and feels that his or her presence was important. Follow-up gives shy people a chance to talk so that they may feel more comfortable speaking at the next meeting. Also, people who have additional ideas can express them during follow-up calls.

Sometimes follow-up can be uncomfortable, especially if the meeting did not go according to plan. All the more reason to follow up! This way, you get views on what went wrong, and you can encourage members to take some responsibility for making the next meeting better.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE SIX: Structure Matters

CCHW [Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste] staff people constantly hear the same three complaints from local leaders:

“I feel like I have to do all the work. Nobody helps me and I’m tired and I want to just quit, but I can’t.”

“Nobody responds. They just sit there. Even when I tell them what to do, they don’t do it.”

“The three of us on the executive committee are getting on each other’s nerves. Everybody wants to pull a power play. We’re not getting anything done except fighting with each other.”

All of these problems have their roots in organizational structure. To avoid these problems, take the time to seriously plan out your group’s structure. If you already have a group, take a good, close look at your group’s structure and make the changes that are needed.

How much structure do you need? Enough to effectively involve your members so that they feel needed and are capable of making decisions—and enough so that you and the other core group members aren’t doing all the work. The structure of your organization should help encourage people to join, get active, and stay active. People quit when they feel useless. They also sometimes quit if they are asked to do things that either are too much for them to handle or are too vague or undirected, leaving them feeling that they don’t know what they’re supposed to be doing.

Most organizations use a pyramid structure, as shown in Figure 1. This structure is very efficient for deci-
Visionmaking, since decisions are made by a few leaders at the very top. But it does not encourage participation or ongoing involvement from the general membership. Occasionally, leaders of a pyramid will ask the general membership to make a decision. The general membership, unaccustomed to being asked and without the direct experience needed to really decide, may just sit there like couch potatoes, confirming the top leadership’s impression that for most of the members, “the lights are on but nobody’s home.”

Leaders often complain that after six months of a campaign, “only a handful of us are left to do the work. Nobody’s coming to meetings.” These problems are the cost of a top-down decision-making structure that does not respect or involve the abilities of its membership.

The opposite extreme is a freeform, leaderless structure where decisions are made only by consensus by everyone who happens to be in the room. The assumption is that everybody is at the same stage of leadership. Making decisions becomes an agonizing process. Every meeting starts from scratch, rebuilding consensus. If the opposition decides to infiltrate a consensus-based organization, it can block any action it doesn’t want.

A model that compromises between these two extremes comes from Citizens Against Toxic Sites (CATS) of New Castle, Pennsylvania. The wheel structure, as shown in Figure 2, is similar to the structure we used at Love Canal.

When new people join the organization, they are asked to join one of several committees. The committee provides them with a specific task that they know how to do and like to do. Delegating tasks this way spreads the work across the organization and prevents burnout. Each committee has a general “mission” and is empowered to setup subcommittees if it needs to. (For example, the Public Relations Committee has a squad of folks that does the CATS newsletter, another that coordinates the speakers’ bureau, others that produce flyers, etc.)

Committees are coordinated by the Executive Committee, which is comprised of two delegates from each committee, plus two co-chairs elected by the general membership. At Executive Committee meetings, all the committees report in on their activities, compare notes, discuss where committee efforts are overlapping, and get clarification or technical approval from the full Executive Committee. Approval for major committee issues takes place at general membership meetings, which give everybody a share in “owning” the organization and provide direction for each committee.

One method Love Canal residents used to get and keep people involved was to appoint block captains who served as “spokes” on the wheel. People volunteered to liaison with a block of ten homes to inform those neighbors about what the group was doing, encourage them to attend membership meetings, and gather their general feelings related to campaign issues. Each block captain’s responsibilities included:

- contact by phone or by visit every two weeks,
distribution of flyers and newsletters,
contact within a week of a meeting held by the group or the opponents,
contact about events and fundraisers,
solicitation of volunteer time and selling or buying tickets to events, and
attendance at block captain meetings to report back to the coordinating committee.

Organizing Principle
Seven: Set Goals So Everyone Knows Where You’re Going and How Far You’ve Come

People will come out more often and stay with a group longer if they see that the group is achieving its goals. Thus it is critically important to have long-term, intermediate-term, and short-term goals to help members understand where they are going and the steps they have mastered along the way. It is also critical to acknowledge and celebrate your successes no matter how small you may think they are.

[For example,] the goal of CCHWs Stop Dioxin Exposure Campaign is a sustainable society in which there is no dioxin formation, discharge, or exposure. Progress towards these goals can be measured by reduction in the dioxin in our food and in breast milk.

A long-term goal for a community campaign to stop dioxin exposure could be to achieve a dioxin-free community or to sustain the community without dioxin-producing industries.

Intermediate goals toward these long-term goals could include closing the local medical waste incinerator, getting the local cement kiln to stop using waste fuel in its processes, or convincing the local university to adopt procurement policies that mandate the purchase of only chlorine-free recycled paper.

A short-term goal could be to secure a meeting with the head of the hospital board to discuss the incinerator, or to get a television story produced on the danger posed by the cement kiln. Short-term goals might also include establishing a strong power base of members with active working committees, or having representatives of your organization speak at ten other organizations in the next two months.

For example, your group’s top goals might come out like this:

- Goal #1: Create a dioxin-discharge-free zone.
- Goal #2: Close the local medical waste incinerator at our county hospital.
- Goal #3: Stop the use of waste fuel in local cement kilns.

Individual decisionmakers have human responses such as guilt, fear, ambition, vanity, and concern over the public’s perceptions of them. These human qualities mean they are capable of being convinced to change.

The following exercise may help your group decide on its goals:

- Ask people to tell you what they think the goals of the organization should be. List these suggested goals on a large sheet of paper at the front of the room.
- Ask the group to narrow down the list. One way to do this is to break the group into smaller groups, asking each to choose the five goals it thinks are most important to work on. Compile a new list from each small group’s list. This new list will be significantly shorter than the original list.
- Discuss the new, shortened list, asking members to explain why they believe a certain goal should stay on the list. A two-minute time limit should be placed on people’s explanations. You may want to establish a rule that each person can only speak once until all have had an opportunity to speak.
- Ask for a show of hands or use a written ballot to select the group’s top five choices.

- Goal #4: Pass a law which mandates that local government institutions must purchase chlorine-free paper.
- Goal #5: Get the community’s pizza restaurant to stop using white chlorine-bleached cartons.

It’s important for everyone to define and mutually agree upon the organization’s goals. When you use an exercise like this one to set those goals, the less essential goals will fall to the bottom without making the people who suggested them feel left out. You will also gain insights as to what people care most about. After you’ve prioritized your list you can separate the goals into long-term, intermediate term, and short-term. Then you’ll know where to start.

Organizing Principle
Eight: Identify Targets

Pinpoint the actions and the people that have the power to help you reach each goal. The people who impede the achievement of your goal are often referred to as the targets of the campaign. This does not mean
that they are evil or bad. It simply means that because they have the power to give you what you want, it makes sense to focus your attention and actions on them.

The target of the campaign must always be a person or persons. You can't fight City Hall because City Hall is a building, and a building can't decide to stop producing dioxin. But you can target the person with the power at City Hall to act on your behalf. Individual decision makers have human responses such as guilt, fear, ambition, vanity, and concern over the public’s perceptions of them. These human qualities mean they are capable of being convinced to change. Institutions don't have these human qualities and thus don't offer these opportunities.

To make a list of targets, your group must answer three key questions:

• Who is responsible for the situation you want to change?
• Who can make the change you want happen?
• How can you convince them to act on your issue?

The first question will lead to a list of names of the corporate polluters and the government agencies who have given or can give a “permit to pollute.” But instead of just getting the names of corporations, you'll need to find out who owns the corporation, and who makes the decisions about the situation you want changed. For government agencies, you also need to identify who has the decision making power.

The second question will establish a list of government officials ranging from local government representatives to the President of the United States. The list will also include all the people you named in the answer to the first question, because the responsible party or parties can also provide the solutions.

The third step is to figure out how these people—these government decision makers and corporate executives—are vulnerable. What would make them do what you want them to do? . . .

**Organizing Principle Nine:**

**Research Is an Essential Tool**

Back in 1921, John Brophy, president of the United Mine Workers Union, said:

> Research is digging facts. Digging facts is as hard as mining coal. It means blowing them out, butting them, picking them, shoveling them, loading them, pushing them to the surface, weighing them and then turning them loose on the public for fuel, light and heat. Facts make a fire which cannot be put out.

Research is a tool, not an end product. You need to research to gather enough information to achieve your goals, not to know absolutely everything there is to know. (Remember: The truth won’t set you free, but organizing will.)

Research can help you identify where your opponent is getting money to support its work. A county hospital, for example, receives state and county subsidies. Sometimes a private corporation will receive subsidies in the form of tax breaks, or in reduced or free utility and sewer fees. Or an incinerator may receive public bond money or loans from a local bank. Your group may be able to impact those who have the authority to approve these funds. You can also research a company’s history of environmental violations, and labor law violations, and other legal actions against them.
In Palmer, Massachusetts, the Ware River Preservation Society looked into the history of Waste Management (now called WMX), which planned to build a regional landfill nearby. Through its research, the group found that Waste Management had been forbidden from operating in Chicago, Illinois, because of a local “bad boy ordinance.” This local law prohibited permits from being issued to companies such as Waste Management that had been found guilty of felony violations. The group applied this research creatively and produced a flyer that asked: “If Chicago the home of notorious gangster Al Capone, decided that Waste Management was too corrupt for their city, why would our community want them?” The flyers were distributed to every home. The following week, after hearing from outraged local residents, the county commission voted to deny the Waste Management proposal.

You should also research to identify where you find potential members. [For example], After you find out where your dioxin sources are, you can do a “community analysis” of which sectors of the community have a special reason to join your group. They might live or work near the source, or have a child enrolled at a local school downwind or downstream.

When people uncover facts, they “own” them—it builds their determination and will to win. Divide the work of collecting research among your group. Find out who in your group loves the information superhighway, and let them do research on-line. Find out who loves the library, and assign them research in the library stacks. Who in your group knows the stock market and can read corporate annual reports? Is there an accountant or bookkeeper to read corporate tax returns? Are there good “people persons” who can find out all the gossip on who makes what decisions at the incinerator or hospital?

**Organizing Principle Ten:**
**Take Direct Actions**

In his 1963* Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote:

> You may well ask, “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path? You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

Any action is any step you take to advance your group’s goals. Petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and educational meetings are all actions that advance your group’s goals. A direct action is the most dramatic type of action, involving confrontation and demands.

You should begin your campaign against a target with the most courteous actions. Your group could write a letter to ask him or her to come to a meeting of your group. Or your letter could ask your target to set up an appointment with key group leaders. If your polite request results in a meeting at which your information and organization convince the target to do what you want done, that is great! Celebrate! But in all likelihood, these actions won’t convince your target, so you will need to intensify your actions. Make sure you have copies of everything you’ve sent. This allows you to prove to the media and to unbelievers that you have tried the more polite approaches.

Direct action begins after your efforts at education, information-sharing, and persuasion are ignored. Or when every effort you’ve made has resulted in the creation of yet another corporate or government committee or study group that will take forever to make recommendations that will eventually be ignored.

Use direct action when your group is ready to confront a decision-maker with its frustrations and to make specific demands. Direct actions move your organization outside the established rules for meetings and discussion. It takes your group into a forum in which you make the rules and where elected representatives and corporate executives are less sure of themselves and of how to handle the situation. A direct action often provides the necessary pressure that forces your target to act on your group’s issue.

You must be careful not to overuse or burn out the membership with too many actions. Each action must be carefully planned, with consideration given to such questions as: What do we want to accomplish with this action? Who is our target and are we asking the right decision maker for something he or she can give us? Should we take this action now or wait for a better opportunity? Is our action something that our members are comfortable participating in? An action should be a milestone in the life of every participant, so you should consider how the action will feel, whether it will be empowering, and whether it will be fun.

Your group needs to develop a detailed plan of action. One example of an action plan can be found in the sidebar.
Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience can be a very powerful form of direct action. It works when it honestly reflects your group’s and your community’s frustration with business and politics as usual. Civil disobedience should be considered when simpler forms of communication and direct action have been ignored.

Acts of civil disobedience are intended to disrupt the corporate or political process that you want to change. Sometimes civil disobedience involves breaking the law your group is trying to change. That’s what North Carolina A & T students Ezell Blair, Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeill did when they sat down at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960.

Other times civil disobedience involves breaking the law to protest a legal practice that is wrong. In 1982, when Warren County, North Carolina, residents lay down in the road to stop the dumping of hazardous waste in their community, they were practicing this form of civil disobedience. So were the activists at the Boston Tea Party.

Civil disobedience requires even more careful planning than other forms of direct action. How will the police respond? How can you control the situation so no one gets hurt? Where will arrested people be taken? Who will deal with the arraignments? Do participants understand the risks, and are they prepared for the legal consequences of an arrest?

Creating a Plan of Action

Let’s say that you want to get the county commissioners to vote against a proposal to build a medical waste incinerator. The commissioners have refused to discuss the issue or vote on it at a regularly scheduled commissioners’ meeting, although you know there have been many back room discussions. Several commissioners are up for re-election and your group feels this is the opportunity to force a vote to see where these commissioners stand on the issue. The following could be your group’s plan of action:

**What is your goal?**
To stop the incinerator.

**Who is your target?**
The commissioners in general, but the chair specifically because he controls the meeting and he is up for re-election.

**What are your demands?**
To get the commissioners to agree to put the issue on next month’s agenda for a full vote.

**What is your theme?**
Democracy—Adults will have lap signs that say “In a democracy, we vote.” Children will hold up American flags and signs that describe what they have learned about representative government. Someone can dress like Uncle Sam.

**What will you do?**
Get your membership to pack the room at the next regularly scheduled county commission meeting.

**How will you measure success?**
If the commissioners agree to place the issue on the agenda; if enough people show up to fill the room; if people walk away feeling good about the activity; if there is some media coverage that will educate the larger public about the issue and the evasiveness of the commissioners during an election campaign season.

You need to plan out every step and every detail and figure out all the things that could go wrong and what your group will do in each situation. Will you have a press conference before the commissioners’ meeting? Who will announce your demands? Will people all march in at the same time or will folks trickle in as they arrive? Who will speak to the commissioners and when? Do they have a sign-up requirement for speaking at these meetings? Who will find out what that requirement is, and who will be sure that key people in your group have their names listed? Who will be responsible for press calls before the event and for producing the press packets? Who will be in charge of the on-site media coordination? Who can talk with the security guards or police if they show up? Who will show people where the nearest public restrooms are? Who will map out the area where your action will take place? Where is the door to the commissioners’ meeting room? How do people get there? Who will produce written directions? Is parking available? What other on-site logistics do you need to consider? Role playing can help you to prepare for “best case” and “worst case” scenarios.

Organizing Principle

Eleven: Target the Media

The news media are managed and owned by corporations. To convince radio stations, journals and magazines, newspapers, and television programs to cover your story you have to answer the following two questions: Who are the media’s decisionmakers who need to be convinced that our story should be covered? What will it take to convince them that our story should be covered?

In most media outlets, the decisionmakers are the editors, and the way you get them to cover you is to spoon-feed them a story they can use without much work.

To spoon-feed the media a story they can use, you must do the following:

- Know their deadlines.
- Know their areas of expertise.
- Visit them.
• Reward them with scoops.
• Realize that they don’t always read their mail, and never bring press packets with them.
• Figure out the formula they use for their stories and use it to write your own story.
• Write your own press release as if it were their story and then be flattered, not offended, when they run the story as their own.
• Hold your events where they can find you.
• Make your events short, creative, and highly visual. Television crews especially hate to cover events that are just a series of talking heads. Also try to see that your events are filled with people similar to the media outlet’s audience.
• Never lie.
• Never tell half-truths.
• Provide stories that will help propel reporters into larger media markets.
• Provide a local angle for regional media.
• Practice your sound bytes.
• Always have a spokesperson available.
• Make sure the media know who the spokesperson is and how he or she can be reached at all times.

Television news editors want visual drama that is understandable in ten-second sound bytes. Talk show editors want good talkers that make their telephones ring. Newspaper editors want to win the Pulitzer Prize. None of these editors wants to spend fifteen minutes finding the telephone number you forgot to put on your press release. Few of these editors will assign a reporter to cover a story that is completely new to them. Sometimes this means that you have to educate the media before they will cover your story. As with every other kind of communication, the best way to do this is in person. Use your door-knocking skills. To get an introduction, find out if someone in your group goes to church with an editor. Does someone have children in the same school? Then take along your fact sheet. Very few editors want to get in trouble with their bosses or their advertising departments, so every fact you provide has to be true. If you’re targeting a corporation that advertises in the newspaper or on the television program or radio station point that out to the editor or reporter you’re working with.

Be persistent. The people have a right to know, and they won’t know about your story if the press won’t report it. Follow up every press release with a telephone call. Make sure that your press release was received by the right person. Ask if the station or paper plans to send a reporter or camera crew. If the answer is no, offer to set up an interview at another time.

If no reporters show up at your event, call the editors and ask them why. Offer to report the story on the phone. Ask reporters and editors for advice on how you can get better coverage next time. Have a few other group members call to ask why there was no coverage.

It is essential to constantly refine and develop your campaign’s media strategy. But don’t be fooled into believing that the media is the only way to get your story out. Keep creating your own media.

**CHAPTER IX**

**THE LEGAL SYSTEM**

You can use the legal system to... [help you fight for your issue], but this method has its limitations. [For example, in the fight against dioxin exposure,] the biggest [limitation] is that it is not illegal to pollute and to discharge dioxins. Corporations are given permits to pollute by state and federal governments. So you can only use the law when a corporation or the government has done something extraordinarily bad. Even then, community groups that use the legal system need to have plenty of money and time. Establishing legal proof means getting experts to fight their experts, and compiling elaborate documentation of wrongdoing. In Woburn, Massachusetts, 52 million and several years were spent on testing and modeling to prove that twenty-two children developed leukemia from water contaminated by trichloroethylene TCE.

When you find an attorney who is willing to assist you and file a suit, two things usually occur. First, your group loses members, who now believe that the lawyer will save the day. Second, the fight is moved out of the community and into the courts.

Lawsuits can, however, offer certain advantages. [For example, in fighting dioxin,] one advantage is the possibility of winning financial compensation for health damage, suffering, and lost property values. The operating facility may also be shut down if it is violating the law. Or the lawsuit may delay the granting of a permit, giving you time to organize to stop the facility. The media usually
will report on court activity, making your organizing more visible.

**Scientific Expertise**

Relying on the strength of scientific information rather than organizing can also cause problems. For one thing, it leads to “dueling experts syndrome” instead of campaigns based on common sense. Dueling experts syndrome can start when a local group brings in one scientist who says the community has a dioxin problem. Then the government or dioxin-polluting corporation brings in two other experts who say there is no problem and no cause for alarm. Members of the community then become confused because they are not sure who is right, and because most people don’t understand the technical arguments or the jargon used.

When the dueling experts syndrome occurs at public meetings, the community loses interest. Members have no role to play, they can’t engage in the discussions, and they have no say since the fight is now in the boxing ring of science.

*There are several advantages to using science and law as a part of your strategy. The information provided by your scientists and lawyers will give your group credibility. But most community-based campaigns are political decisions. They are brought about by organizing, not by lawsuits or the power of scientific data.*

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Greatest her likelihood is of having breast cancer. None of these terrible findings alone convinced the dioxin polluters to stop polluting. Nor did these documented problems—directly correlated to contamination—convince the EPA to step in and force the responsible corporations to protect the community.

However, there are several advantages to using science as a part of your strategy. [Again, in a campaign to stop dioxin exposure,] first, the information provided by your scientists will give your group credibility. Scientists like Theo Colborn have helped communities understand the science behind their problems. Their studies can show that you are not fabricating these horrible stories. Second, science can provide information on the types of health problems people experience as a result of dioxin exposures. This information may help your group identify others in your community who might be interested in joining. Scientific information showing dioxin levels in cow’s milk and meat, for example, can trigger a group effort to recruit ranchers or dairy farmers.

History has shown us that the decisions to evacuate a community, clean up a dumpsite, or force an existing industry to clean up its dioxin discharges are political decisions. They are brought about by organizing, not by lawsuits or the power of scientific data.

The first evacuation at Love Canal was a result of the pressure Love Canal residents exerted on New York Governor Hugh Carey while he was running for re-election. Love Canal residents followed Carey everywhere, carrying signs and distributing fact sheets and press statements. Residents held the governor personally responsible for the Love Canal situation.

However, political strategies need to be supported by scientific information and sometimes by legal maneuvers. You can use the scientific information you have gathered to put pressure on your target. As Love Canal residents followed Governor Carey around, we said over and over again, “56 percent of our children have been born with birth defects. How many more children must be born deformed before you act to protect them?”

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