

Strategy in an Hour

“Strategy — in the face of impending war, financial crises, time crunch, staff changes or despair — is impossible.” Well, I don’t think that’s true, but certainly lots of us do carry that belief! So here’s a one-hour tool that I’ve used when all of those factors were true! — maybe it can work for you and your group, too.

How to Lead

STEP 1: Brainstorm the Negative Conditions in Society [about 20 minutes]

First, break into small groups (groups of four or five should work). Clearly give them the task of coming up with the conditions of society that block them from winning on their issue (for example an anti-war group might ask: what conditions are part of the war machine in our society?). What we’re looking for here are *as-specific-as-possible* conditions. So rather than saying “thoughtless patriotism,” encourage specificity: “US Patriot Act,” “bad US history textbooks,” or “US government acting unilaterally over and against the United Nations.” In fact (and you don’t need to let the participants in on this secret), these make targets for social change because they are root causes of violence and greed in society. These conditions may be about the culture of the group, i.e. “staying in reactive mode.” That’s perfectly fine for this list — it’s another root cause!

So, after explaining the task to the small groups, have them write down (yes, tell them to get a note-taker!) the conditions they come up with in ten minutes.

After the small groups have about ten minutes with the task, bring them back together to share. I have each group read one condition at a time, then write it up on flipchart for all to see. The groups then rotate, adding to the list — this way, each small group keeps contributing. You don’t need to get everything on the list — get enough so people have a number of conditions out there.

STEP 2: Brainstorm actions we can do or are doing to fix those conditions [about 40 minutes]

In the same small groups as they were in before, have the participants repeat the brainstorm and note-taking process. This time, since it’s a bit of a harder task, give them at least fifteen minutes.

The task this time is for the small groups to come up with specific programmatic changes or actions to address/change those conditions. For example, to challenge the US Patriot Act one might suggest getting City Council to pass a resolution against it and other actions to undermine that condition. Try to give a couple of examples of things the group could do and a few of things the group is doing.

After the small groups have worked for fifteen minutes, bring them back together and get together their ideas. Allow for some discussion when the group is having useful conversation/debate, but try to balance the energy of the list, too. Continue to go as long as you have time or groups have ideas. Once you finish you should have a great list of actions to take! It will be easier for you to sort through them not only for feasibility but also to compare which one is most likely to contribute toward your group's larger goal. That's what makes actions strategic — when it isn't only an expression of how we feel or a brilliantly designed action — but helps build a movement that achieves its goal. So congratulations!

Why This Works

Underlying this notion is the idea that strategizing is about putting activists on the offensive! Step 1 clearly has us choosing the target. Step 2 is about designing actions to get our targets! In playing football, for example, to catch the ball you need to go to where the football is going to be — not where it currently is! Similarly, as activists, we need to design strategies which move to where the trends are — where the football is heading — not just responding to the current headline.

Of course, a one-hour strategizing tool is no substitute for the work of planning a campaign, or figuring out how short-term objectives relate to building a movement in the long run. All that does take more time. But doing strategizing in bite-sized amounts may whet the appetite of the group for the bigger strategic feast.

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