Paper Plate Challenge

Goals
▶ to design the outline stages of one's campaign;
▶ to gain experience and skill in defining clear objectives (or tactics);
▶ to understand one's own notions about how change happens.

Campaigns don't win all at once – they win through taking successful steps. Being able to break down the steps towards winning is a key skill for successful strategizing. This tool gives participants challenge and practice in setting stepping stones along the way and sequencing those to lead to an eventual win.

The basic concept is to have each person write down the steps they think their campaign needs to take in order to win. Since it is such a big challenge -- so easy to be broad, not specific, or unrealistic -- this exercise utilizes a) a physical set-up and structure (paper plates) to support clearer thinking; and b) getting support from other participants in small groups; and c) debriefing midway to support clarity of objectives.

NOTE: This tool was created to order *objectives* based on the critical-path analysis. However, many groups are also using this same design to practice ordering *tactics* to help build a campaign. Whichever way you use it, be clear about your goals and rationale for your choice.

Step 1: Create groups and explain the set-up
First put participants into small groups – groups of four to five work well. Have the groups spread out around the room.

Then put in the middle of the room some symbol, like a bowl of fruit, and explain that this is the "vision." It's what folks are working towards – their specific (as opposed to broad) campaign goals.

Each participant will be given five to six paper plates (extras are available if needed). The task for each participant is to place paper plates starting from where they are now to their vision, putting specific outcomes that are important "stepping stones" to that vision on the plates.

Someone working on a campaign to end the use of plastic bags in their state, might have as some of the stepping stones "20 articles published in state newspapers and magazines," "5 action groups working to abolish the use of plastic bags started," "5,000 buttons distributed to allies saying 'No to Plastic Bags', targeting people working in grocery stores and jobs that use bags," "10 more action groups added," and so on, until eventually they win their campaign.

Each paper plate is one outcome to achieve. While most of those outcomes are objectives that the organization is responsible for; a few of them might external factors, like an oil crisis, that do help the movement along.

The reason for having people in groups is that folks can use their support to bounce ideas off of, get challenged about the efficacy of each outcome, and get some feedback about the order of the steps, too. Acknowledge up front that it's intended to be a challenge.

Invite questions and clarify as needed.

Notes: If you're using this tool in a group that's all working on the same campaign/issue, you may want to adapt it so folks are creating the objectives/plates together.

It may be a challenge to get the group to think in terms of bite-sized campaigns. While "economic justice for all" is a great vision, this exercise is most effective when identifying outcomes with a clear scope, like "getting five affordable housing complexes built." One way to support the group to get more specific is to allow the larger scope in an earlier exercise, such as with the Vision Gallery tool or Scenario Writing.

Step 2: Groups work
Allow groups to work, giving support as needed to get specific. Between 20 to 40 minutes may be needed for this part. Disagreement and discussion among participants is great here for learning. Facilitators should be very available for support, coaching, and as a resource.

Step 3: Debrief on what makes for good outcomes
Interrupt before most groups look finished for a quick check-in with how people are doing. Make a quick list of what qualities good outcomes have, based on as people are making them.

You might introduce the concept of "SMART" objectives: **S**equential, **M**easurable, **A**chieveable, **R**ealistic, **T**ime-specific. That might be a measuring stick that people might check back with their outcomes to see if they match those qualities.

This step may take 5-10 minutes.

Step 4: Give folks some more time to finish up
As people are finishing, you might move in to a break so that people can informally share with each other, spend part of the break finishing if they so wish, or just read people's stepping stones that they created.

Step 5: Short Debrief
After the break, spend just a few minutes debriefing how that was for people. Invite people to consider the usefulness of what they've just done. You might have a couple of people demonstrate how they see their campaign winning through modeling the steps.

In essence, they've created what's called a "critical path analysis" -- which is an analysis of what outcomes/objectives need to be achieved in order to successfully win. Those, of course, may change as the environment changes. But having a sense of the scope of a campaign and how the pieces work together, i.e. seeing how education tactics lead up to the next step, deeply supports smart strategic campaigning.

Created by Daniel Hunter (Training for Change)
with James Whelan and Sam LaRocca (The Change Agency)
For more information on critical path analysis, see: www.TheChangeAgency.org
For the Vision Gallery and Scenario Writing or other tools, see: www.TrainingForChange.org