

Action Strategy 101

Goal

Here is a way to bring out unreflected wisdom about what makes actions effective. Note the experiential cycle. Rather than starting with a lecture on what actions are the message, this helps draw that wisdom out of the group. The result is stronger personal integration and people creating their own internal pathways to understanding – which is a key to empowerment.

How to Lead

Get people into small groups. Have them share a story of a highly effective action they were part of or organized. Give each person three minutes to tell the story of that action.

Reflection: After sharing the story, invite them to think of what made it effective? Encourage them to ignore externalities outside of control of the activists – like the weather or that an ally unexpectedly showed up. Give them a couple minutes for this part.

Generalization: Create a list titled “Actions: What works?” Invite their reflections. Interact with particular reflections to help them move from isolated reflection to general principles. During this stage use elicitive questions to dig down.

For example:

Participant: We had a huge march down to city hall. (“Having a huge march” is not a general principle of what we do. So trainer digs down deeper.)

Trainer: Ah. And what made that so effective?

Participant: The number of people, and the energy.

Trainer: Okay...a lot of people and energy. And what about the action caused you to achieve that?

Participant: Well, it was well-timed. City hall just announced cuts and people were pissed.

Trainer: What made the timing so effective?

Participant: We were the only thing happening. Nobody else was out there responding.

Trainer: Sounds like the action achieved numbers of people by responding quickly to an immediate issue, and mobilizing quickly to give people expression to what was inside them.

Participant: Exactly. (An implementable principle has been identified, e.g. “Well-timed actions, e.g. giving expression when nobody else is.” Trainer might elicit an example from the group or tell a story. For example...)

Trainer: When Diane Nash from the Civil Right’s Nashville sit-ins explained her attraction to the movement, she said exactly this theme. She said she was not confident that sit-ins would make a difference, but they were “the only game in town.” This can be used by activists by looking at what’s not out there and trying to fulfill a need. James Lawson, who led the trainings in Nashville, saw this and created an opportunity to express people’s anger. Key principles can be added to the list if they do not emerge, like the action is the message (see ActionMill.com) or action components of “say/symbol/do.”

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Application: Review an action you have been part of – or will be designing in the future – and identified how you could strength it based on the list above.

Where This Tool Comes From

Designed by Daniel Hunter, Training for Change based on a previous design by Action Mill (ActionMill.com)