

From Tactics to Strategy

Goals

To help participants move from thinking tactically to strategically;
Introduction of a cognitive framework;
Consideration of the values of different tactics as they fit within a larger strategy.

Time

1.5 hours

How to Lead

As activists, many of us love tactics! So here's a tool which uses that to help us think about overall strategy more effectively.

TWO METHODS

METHOD 1: Mingling

Hand out letter-sized pieces of blank paper and invite participants to write on it their favorite tactics. (Review the definition of a "tactic" and make sure it is inclusive, not only direct action but also kinds of alternative institutions, or culture work, etc.) Once they have done that, ask them to stand up and mingle, holding their paper in front of them. As they mingle, have them find others who in some way seem similar.

Once the clusters have appeared, ask them to sit down in the clusters and talk about what they find in common. Invite individuals to feel free to "try out" other clusters if they suspect there might be a better match.

When they've settled down, ask them to consider that there might be a sequence to the clusters, that some clusters of tactics might better go before others in order to prepare the way or build capacity for later tactics. Ask the clusters to arrange themselves on the floor in sequence. This will be cheerfully chaotic and require some inter-cluster negotiation. A few individuals might shift again, also.

Then move to the Debrief.

METHOD 2: Brainstorm Tactics

Invite participants to brainstorm a list of their favorite tactics. (Review the definition of a "tactic" and make sure it is inclusive, not only direct action but also kinds of alternative institutions, or culture work, etc.)

After a range of tactics are on the list (20 or so is generally fine), get participants in small groups (four or five). In their small groups, have them take a section of the list (you might break it apart) and identify if they would put the tactics in the beginning, middle, or end of a campaign. After working for a couple of minutes, have them share their results in the large group.

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After sharing, have the group notice what are themes. “How might we characterize the beginning stage? The middle stage? The end stage?” Notice major themes. Then move to the Debrief.

Debrief

What participants have just done is begin to make a broad, general framework of why certain tactics make sense at certain moments (and less at others). Sometimes tactics are elevated to a status where they are always appropriate or appropriate irregardless of strategy. Not so: tactics should be guided by strategy.

Invite participants to notice the decisions they already reached; i.e. why they decided certain tactics come before others and build on each other. Notice the tendency of increasing capacity over time (effective strategies build capacity over time).

At this point, you might begin to introduce a particular framework (such as the 5-stage revolutionary framework developed by George Lakey, the 8-stage framework developed by Bill Moyer or the 6-stage campaign planning framework by Martin Luther King, Jr.). Compare those frameworks with what the group created. Get clarity about the flow.

Not everyone will agree with any framework (nor needs to) – it’s in a spirit of exploring strategy lessons we can use! For more on the different frameworks for social change, see Frameworks for Social Change under Tools on the Training for Change website.

Where This Tool Comes From

George Lakey, Training for Change, originally in Holland at an international nonviolence trainers conference in 1992.