

## WHY ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTION?

Social action can sometimes be confrontational and combative. So why would you choose to use these methods?

There are several reasons why social action the appropriate choice is often:

- **It can empower and energize populations that have traditionally been powerless or haven't understood their potential for exercising power.** The experience of participating in an action – especially if it's successful – can be uplifting for people who've never thought they could influence the course of events. It can change the way they look at themselves, and give them a different perspective on what's possible. And it can prepare and sustain them for a long struggle to achieve far-reaching goals.

This can be true even for people who may not have been part of the original action. Witnessing what people like themselves can accomplish may inspire others either to join the current effort, or to join – or even start – similar efforts in the future.

- **It can unify communities.** Collective action brings people together in the way that many collaborative activities do. It creates a spirit of shared effort and shared passion, and binds individuals into a community of shared purpose.
- **It can demonstrate to the larger community that the organized group is a force to be reckoned with.** People have to respect and deal with its needs and interests, even if they don't agree with them.

- **It may be the only thing that will move a stubborn opponent.** The targets of social action may have been in power for a long time, or may believe that things were simply meant to be the way they are. It may take a long campaign of action to convince them that they have to address your concerns.
- **It may be seen as morally necessary.** Social action can be hard and unpopular. People generally engage in it because they believe their cause is right, and may see it as their moral duty to do something about it.
- **It can motivate people to take other kinds of positive action.** Once people realize that they can influence what happens in their world, they become willing to take on other kinds of tasks – starting cooperatives, rehabilitating derelict housing, cleaning up neighborhoods. They begin to understand that they have the resources to solve many of their own problems, and they develop the motivation and skills to use those resources.
- **It can be the beginning of a process that ends in a more unified larger community.** Once a group has established its strength and made clear that it can't be pushed, there is a possibility of accommodation and eventual collaboration with those who were once its opponents.
- **It can lead to long-term positive social change.** Social action, like other forms of community organizing, generally has long-term as well as short-term goals. While the purpose of a particular action might be narrowly defined, the long-term goals of most organizing are greater equity and social and economic justice. A well-managed social action campaign that maintains its momentum over the long haul can result in a truly democratic society, where everyone's voice counts. Once again, the prime example in our time was the Civil Rights movement, which, through action that

demonstrated its moral force, moved the whole country to demand an end to segregation and racism.

## WHEN SHOULD ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTION?

- **When negotiation and reason don't produce satisfactory results.** Sometimes, being reasonable just doesn't work. For whatever reason – fear, anger, the impulse to protect privileges, prejudice, political philosophy – your opponent won't listen or respond to your concerns or won't go far enough to truly address the issue.
- **When time is short.** The chainsaws are already running to devastate that patch of old-growth forest; the wrecking ball is swinging toward the wall of that historic building; legislators are about to cut food stamps to pay for disaster relief. In these cases and many like them, action may be the only quick way to draw attention to the short-sightedness or injustice of what's about to happen.

The implication here is that time may be short because what's about to happen can't be reversed once it's done. You might be able to change a law, or to challenge it in court; but you can't bring back an old-growth forest or a historic building.

- **When the time is right.** The issue may be gaining recognition in the media or public opinion, or public opinion may be changing in your favor. You may have a window of opportunity here. An action at the right time can solidify support, and really put your effort over the top.

- **When you have the resources to make action possible.** Just having the resources— enough people, money, media contacts, etc. — is hardly an excuse for engaging in action, but it's a necessary foundation for doing so.
- **When you want to make a dramatic statement that will focus public attention.** Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, but that wasn't what eventually integrated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama. It was the year-long bus boycott carried out by black citizens of the city that led to an end to segregated buses. The boycott caught the attention of the nation, and affected business in Birmingham. Ultimately, the case was decided in federal court and black citizens won: public transportation in Montgomery was integrated, and the boycott ended.
- **When you want to energize and empower the community, and develop community leadership.** Social action gets people moving. It makes them feel strong, and makes them less likely to submit meekly to the rules and demands of those in power. It gives people responsibility for their own lives and actions, and brings out their leadership potential.
- **When you want to catch the attention of the public – and the media – and galvanize public opinion in your favor about an issue or about your organization or community.** In the barrage of news reports and disasters that assaults the public consciousness every day, it's easy for your message, or even your existence, to get lost. Social action can make people aware of your cause and your community.

## WHEN SHOULD NOT ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTION?

Just as there are many reasons to engage in social action, there may be many reasons not to. In general, it makes sense to use the least aggressive method possible to achieve your goals. If you can get most of what you're after by collaboration and compromise, you can retain a positive relationship with the opposition, and they'll be more likely to be willing to negotiate the next time. Therefore, social action should only be used when it's necessary. Some times when social action would be unwise:

- When you can get what you want by lower-key means – negotiation, acceptable trade-offs, persuasion, compromise, etc.
- When you don't have the strength to mount a convincing social action. If you don't have a large enough group to exert any power, for instance, you still have organizing work to do before you're ready to take action.
- When you're operating on rumor rather than fact. Make sure you know that you're taking action about something real, rather than gossip or fourth-hand reports. You can discredit your whole effort by failing to check your facts.
- When an action, even if successful, could have disastrous social or political consequences. In some instances, you could gain your immediate demand at the cost of creating a backlash that drives your cause back beyond where you started. Social action may still be warranted here – the Civil Rights Movement certainly could be described in these terms, especially at the beginning – but you should be aware of its consequences, both to your cause and to the individuals and groups involved.

