

Author  
Andrew Metheven and Joanne Sheehan

Defining strategy is like trying to hit a moving target; we can name and describe some of the elements within it (organising, messaging, an aim, the available people, skills and resources...) but it is really the interaction between all of these different elements that make strategy what it is. This section ('developing strategic campaigns') and the one following it ('organising effective nonviolent action') are a series of tools and models that have been developed by activists over many decades, that can help us to plan campaigns that are strategic and effective. No one element is a strategy, no matter how effectively it's used; a strategy is when the elements are brought together and used effectively to make change.

Some tools are about specific elements of a campaign - like using the media, planning an action or ways of organising our groups - while others are much broader tools that help to make sense of how movements and campaigns function - like the Movement Action Plan or conflict escalation. Remember that an effective strategy is something that happens; if change remains a 'paper exercise' – grand ideas with no action – then there is no strategy; strategy is the thinking, the planning and the doing.

## **What is strategy?**

“[strategy] is how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want. It is how we transform our resources into the power to achieve our purposes. It is the conceptual link we make between the targeting, timing, and tactics with which we mobilise and deploy resources and the outcomes we hope to achieve”

### **Marshall Ganz, 'Why David Sometimes Wins'**

## **Analysis**

After that initial desire to respond to a problem, it is important to step back and make sure we have understood if; what is the issue we're facing? Why is it a problem? How does 'our' problem fit within wider society, or even a global scale? What other problems and issues does it relate to? While it is important to focus in on an issue, it is also important to understand how the change you are working for fits within a broader movement; for example, a campaign to halt work at an opencast coal mine near a particular village also fits into a global movement of people concerned for the environment. A good understanding of the systemic issues that are underlying the problem we hope to address is important, too. The activists in the photo below are taking action against the arms industry, yet they have not gone to a military base, or an arms factory – they've covered themselves in red paint at a bank! Why? Because they had a strong understanding of the systemic background to the problem – in this case, the relationship between arms trade and the financial sector.



Activists cover themselves in red paint, at a protest against the a bank's investments in the arms trade

## **The environment**

An important part of analysis is understanding how the problem we hope to address with our campaign relates to wider society; the better we understood the environment we hope to make change in, the better we will be placed to act. It can be surprising how a small amount of pressure, placed at the right time and in the right way, can make a lot of change happen! The environment might include (but is not limited to):

- mainstream cultural attitudes and assumptions;
- economic conditions;
- local, national a and international policy;
- who the power-holders and decision makers are;
- other activist groups associated with your issue;
- supportive (and non-supportive) individuals and social groups;
- the way local and national media 'works'.

When we think and act strategically, we are taking into account the particular social environment the issue sits within, and our hopes and desires for the future; we will be able then to develop a process to move us between the two. A strategy incorporates an understanding of the 'here and now', with a theory of change, and a vision of the future we hope to achieve.

## **Our friends and allies**

“Good strategy involves people. It emphasises not just where we are going but how we get there.”

### **Si Kahn, 'A Guide for Grassroots Leaders'**

People are essential to our campaigns; it is hard to find a successful 'one-person' campaign! How we organise our groups and encourage new people to join in is an essential part of building a strategy for long-lasting change, as does making sure that our group culture reflects the change we want to see. This means

building power-within individuals, power-with each other, and power-to make change happen (see '[nonviolence and power](#)'). The irony of hierarchical, patriarchal, exclusionary, “liberation” movements is lost on some. Strategy should bring and hold people together.

Nonviolent movements shouldn't treat people like the military do; no one is cannon-fodder or expendable (see '[burnout](#)'), when someone leaves a group or movement through physical or emotional exhaustion, can be seen as an example of someone being 'used'.) Good strategy is built, primarily, on the experience of those effected by the problem or environment you hope to change, and includes them as equal partners in organising and strategising; it puts their voices first.

## **Conflict, nonviolence, and adversaries**

“We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.”

### **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Strategy allows us to engage in nonviolent conflict with confidence, discipline and creativity, because strategy enables us to identify the conditions we hope to change, and the adversaries we will have to challenge or influence in order to do so. Knowing who makes decisions, how we might be able to place pressure on them, and when might be a good time to do that means that our campaigns will be focused, disciplined and less resource intensive. Nonviolence means that we continue to see our adversaries as people, even when their ideas or actions feel like the antithesis of the world we want to create. Nonviolence also allows to escalate conflict, in a manner which is positive, disciplined and creative, not destructive or alienating, as violent conflict escalation is

## **The goal and the message**

Following on from the 'analysis' section above, there are plenty of activist groups in the world who cannot answer, briefly and succinctly, the question “what is it you want to change?” Whether the goal is a radical transformation of society, removing a corrupt government, reforming a particular unjust law, or raising awareness of a particular issue, it is important that a campaign articulates what change it wants to occur, and how it expects to see that happen – no matter how 'out there' or aspirational that may seem. Without this very simple, but often overlooked element, a campaign will have little traction.

Your goal may fit within a broader vision – a long term change you hope to see; perhaps for 'a world without war', or for 'all people to live equally and happily'. Asking how this is reflected in your goal (and, indeed, throughout the whole of your campaign) is important.

Being able to communicate your goal – the message - is also critical. Finding creative, challenging and engaging ways to communicate is great, and it is often the case that simple, bold messages are the most effective. What do people need to know immediately about your campaign? What could be saved for later?

## **Timing**

Strategy takes account of time - do you have a week to get your friend out of the immigration deportation centre, or three years before the government decides it's long-term policy on renewable energy? Being strategic sometimes means we wait to fully use our resources, but that doesn't mean we do nothing. If there is an opportunity just around the corner to take advantage of (an international summit, an economic crisis, a parliamentary vote, a high profile activist being arrested) what do we need to do now to be ready to respond, so we're not left standing when we should be moving? The example of the Montgomery Bus Boycott above

is an excellent example of a highly relevant, well-timed, strategic campaign, that did the organising, education and empowerment groundwork.

## Skills & Resources

To be strategic, we also need to consider what resources and skills we have available; people, information, money, buildings, skills, contacts, community links and a whole multitude of other things - how can we use it if we don't know we've got it? If we don't have it, where can we get it from? It is also important to be realistic about what resources we do and don't have, about what those involved in our campaign are and are not able to do. Training in nonviolence is a key part of building the 'skill base' of our movements.

Most importantly, strategy means we know how we're going to use all of these resources to creatively and effectively apply the pressure to bring about the change we hope to see. While our movements may at first seem ridiculously under-resourced for taking on the adversaries we face, we can look at other campaigns that have managed to make change with very limited resources for inspiration.

## Tactics

A good strategy keeps us focused on our goal when we are planning actions, writing printed material, talking to the media, or any of the other practical, day-to-day things that make up a campaign. Strategy helps us to choose forms of tactic that are relevant to our particular situation, and the sort of change we hope to make. Is shutting down an arms factory with blockades going to be more effective than a long-term 'constructive programme' to create local peace-orientated jobs and build new cultural norms? Or could a combination of the two allow us to work on many fronts at once? Our strategy should inform which tactics are used in its day-to-day functioning.

## Responding to change

Crucially, good strategy isn't just a theoretical exercise that a group participates in as a one-off and then forgets - it is at its best when it is thought of as a process that is ongoing, dynamic, reflective, and as relevant to the long term goals of a campaign as it is to the everyday actions of activists. Strategy needs to be flexible and responsive; things change and we meet surprises, but having a clear strategy allows us to respond to new situations or dynamics creatively and effectively – if the strategy is changing and developing, then that's a good thing!

## Related content

[en](#)  
[es](#)  
[fr](#)  
[de](#)

- [Why things don't "just happen"](#)
- [Planning nonviolent campaigns](#)

## Comments

There are no comments on this article. Have you got something related to this topic, you'd like to say? Please feel free to be the first person to make a comment.

## Add new comment

Your name

Email

Homepage

Language

English



Subject

Comment

[About text formats](#)

Save

Preview