

Strategies for Dissent and Advocacy

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Volunteer groups need not only to develop good action plans but also to consider the most effective strategies for implementing those plans. Let's assume that you have decided to take action on an issue. What is the best strategy for getting the support you need? Three options are available to you: the collaborative, campaign, or conflict strategy.¹ The choice of strategies depends primarily on the level of agreement on (1) the issue and (2) the way in which your group proposes to address the issue.

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY

The collaborative strategy is appropriate when a person or group wanting to make a change (called the "change agent") and the community, agency, or group to be involved in the change agree on (1) the issue, and (2) ways of dealing with the issue. When such agreement exists there is issue consensus. The change agent is a facilitator, stimulator, or catalyst. Those involved are open to ideas about the issue and ways of dealing with the issue and are confident that, by gathering information and communicating ideas, consensus can be reached. The collaborative strategy is probably the one we find most comfortable and use most.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

The campaign strategy is appropriate when there is issue difference, that is when there is lack of agreement on (1) whether an issue

exists, and (2) how an issue is to be resolved. However, although differences exist, the assumption is that consensus can be reached. The person or group wanting to bring about change has preconceived ideas which have to be sold. Thus the change agent is persuader, campaigner, or convincer. The desired outcome is consensus, but if that is to occur, apathy or opposition must be overcome.

CONFLICT STRATEGY

The conflict strategy is appropriate when there is issue dissensus, that is when there is complete disagreement on whether an issue exists and how the issue is to be resolved. There is a conflict between "us" and "them." Thus the change agent is a contestant working to have his or her side win. There are preconceived ideas about the issues and the way in which the issues should be resolved. Saul Alinsky, who taught how to use conflict strategy, gave the following three directives:

1. cut the issue
2. freeze the target
3. go to war

"Cutting the issue" means clearly identifying the issue about which there is conflict. Sometimes groups believe they strengthen their case by presenting a parade of horrors--a long list of grievances. A group is more effective when it clearly articulates what it wants to achieve, presents well-documented

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supporting evidence, and is persistent.

"Freezing the target" means identifying the enemy or opposition. Sometimes time is wasted and momentum is lost if a group fails to identify and deal directly with those who are on the other side of the conflict. It is also important, of course, to identify allies and to garner their support.

To "go to war" involves honestly facing being in a win/lose situation, and deciding to accept the risks inherent in conflict. It also means amassing resources and uniting in an all-out effort to win. The conflict strategy should not be used unless a group is committed enough to live with the consequences of its action--win or lose.

CASE STUDIES

In reality the choice of strategies is often not so clear-cut. We may use elements of all three strategies in any given situation or we may use one and later another. For example if a group has used the conflict strategy and won, it may then make use of the campaign strategy in an attempt to restore unity.

Each of the following three case studies illustrates a situation in which one of the three strategies would be appropriate. The case studies are most useful as role playing experiences in volunteer training and should be followed by discussion.

CASE STUDY 1

PLEASANTVILLE--THE COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY

A. Issue

A developer built and sold thirty new homes within a very short period of time in Pleasantville, a town of five hundred located about twenty miles from Capital City. Most of the homes were purchased by young couples who worked in the city. The Pleasantville Community Improvement Council wanted to develop a

project to (1) welcome the newcomers to the community, and (2) involve them in community life. After careful consideration of needs and goals they decided to sponsor a summer "Welcome to Pleasantville" program which would include the following objectives:

1. Invite the established residents of the community to be a part of visiting teams who would call on new families on a widely-publicized "Welcome to Pleasantville Night"--scheduled for June 15. Each team would present to the newcomers gifts or gift certificates provided by local businesses; a list of local services, prepared by the Business and Professional Club; and an interest-finder, telling of opportunities for involvement and service in the community and inviting newcomers to check the form indicating in what ways they would like to participate.
2. Hold a pot-luck "Welcome to Pleasantville" picnic on Sunday, July 17, in the village park.
3. Analyze the interest-finders with appropriate follow-up action by August 22.

B. Change Agent

Pleasantville Community Improvement Council. The role of the change agent is to act as facilitator, stimulator, catalyst.

C. Basic Elements in the Collaborative Strategy

Issue consensus; actual or potential consensus about the issue and how to deal with the issue.

D. Objective of Change Agent

To involve the total community in a summer program welcoming new residents and inviting their participation in community life.

E. Task

To carry out the plan of action.

The key to the collaborative strategy is that there is consensus on the issue. The community as a whole accepts the idea that new residents should be welcomed and invited to participate in community life. Furthermore there is consensus about the way in which the Improvement Council proposes to deal with the issue, i.e., planning a summer "Welcome to Pleasantville" program. Agreement on the issue and its solution is based on knowledge and communication. The collaborative strategy is consistent with the style of the Improvement Council and is compatible with the social environment of the community. Finally, the consequences are very likely to be looked upon favorably by the majority of the community's citizens. Thus the collaborative strategy is the best possible choice.

CASE STUDY 2

LAKESIDE--THE CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

A. Issue

For the past three years, a service club in Centerville has been active in dealing with issues related to Centerville's senior citizens. They have formed a close relationship with the Lakeside Residents' Council. Lakeside is a housing complex for senior citizens. Working together, the Residents' Council and the Service Club have not only been effective in obtaining improved services for senior citizens in Centerville, but also have sharpened public awareness about issues. At a recent meeting of the Service Club and the Residents' council, insensitive, patronizing attitudes toward the aged were discussed. Two specific instances were cited.

One of the Lakeside residents, an alert, attractive, vivacious woman of 83, fell and broke her hip and was taken to the local hospital. During her recovery she was in a great deal

of pain and under heavy sedation. For some years she had been troubled with bladder spasms, and as a result, needed to go to the bathroom promptly when a spasm occurred. Because of pain and sedation, it was difficult for her to find and turn on the light to summon the hospital attendant. In addition, hospital personnel did not always respond promptly to calls. As a result, one night she soiled her bed, for which she was scolded by a hospital employee. She was miserable, embarrassed and humiliated. Her roommate reported the incident to Service Club friends who came to visit.

The second specific situation concerning the group was the patronizing, condescending attitude of some of the therapists at Lakeside, especially those working with convalescent residents who took part in the morning exercise and awareness program in the solarium. The dialogue went something like this: "All right, folks. What day is it today? What month? What year? That's fine! And what holiday are we about to celebrate? Valentine's Day! Good, George. And what kinds of decorations do we put up on Valentine's Day?"--And so on.

Members of the Resident's Council and the Service Club were indignant about both situations. They considered talking to administrators with the objective of demanding that staff involved be fired. However, after further discussion, they determined that the issue they wished to address was attitude change.

B. Change Agent

Lakeside Manor Residents' Council and Service Club. The role of the change agent is to act as persuader, campaigner, or convincer.

C. Basic Elements in Strategy

Issue difference: lack of agreement on whether issue exists and lack of agreement on how issue is to be resolved.

D. Objective of Change Agent

To change attitudes of personnel at Lakeside and at the hospital so that senior citizens are treated with respect. (In developing a plan of action this objective would need to include specific answers to the questions: How much or how many? Within what period of time? With what results?)

E. Task

Develop a plan to achieve the objective using the campaign strategy.

The key to campaign strategy is that there is a difference of opinion about the issue. In this case it is assumed that hospital and Lakeside Manor personnel either do not know or do not care that their behavior is offensive and damaging to the self-respect of senior citizens whom they serve. The Residents' Council and the Service Club, on the other hand, want to encourage attitudes that reflect sensitivity and respect. Thus there apparently is lack of agreement that an issue exists. The Service Club and the Residents' Council will probably develop a plan of action involving education and persuasion, techniques used in the campaign strategy. The campaign strategy is consistent with the style of the Service Club and Residents' Council which have a history of working for improved services for senior citizens and for sharpening public awareness about issues. Their track record makes it feasible for them to risk the consequences of addressing this issue. Thus we would anticipate a successful outcome.

CASE STUDY 3

JACKSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-- THE CONFLICT STRATEGY

The conflict strategy is appropriate when there is issue dissensus, that is when there is complete disagreement on whether an issue exists and how the issue is to be resolved.

There is a conflict between "us" and "them." Thus the change agent is a contestant.

There are preconceived ideas about issues and issue solutions and the outcome of the strategy is that one or the other side is expected to win. The following case study illustrates the conflict strategy.

A. Issue

The Board of Education in Metroville has made a decision to close Jackson Elementary School. The Jackson PTA and the Jackson Neighborhood Association are unalterably opposed to the Board's decision.

Enrollment in Jackson Elementary has been declining for several years. Present school population is 250. The building is old and needs repair. It is located at the intersection of two busy streets. The Board maintains that decreasing enrollment, increased energy costs, and a seven percent property tax lid have made the cost per pupil too high to justify keeping Jackson Elementary open. The PTA rejects the way in which the Board is computing energy costs. Furthermore the PTA and the Neighborhood Association contend that a substantial grant in Community Development Block Grant funds to be spent in the neighborhood will decrease out-migration and increase population. They also argue that, because of escalating housing costs, first-home buyers, who tend to have young families, will seek older homes in the neighborhood.

Several months ago the Board formed a Committee of One Hundred to establish criteria for closing neighborhood schools. After meeting for several weeks the committee recommended that no schools currently under consideration be closed. The Board contends that the committee didn't really understand the financial situation.

Board members are elected at large. The Board is very cohesive and supports the Superintendent, an able, ambitious man. The Board be-

believes they have bitten the bullet and they are willing to accept the consequences. They contend that they are not denying the neighborhood a school in that another elementary school is located a little less than a mile from Jackson.

Recently the Board announced its decision to build an elementary school in Valley Home, a new subdivision in which population is expanding. The Jackson neighborhood was incensed, accusing the Board of fiscal irresponsibility and favoritism.

The Superintendent and the Board would like to let the storm blow over and avoid further confrontation with the Jackson neighborhood. However in a recent editorial one of the two daily newspapers has accused the Board of being insensitive to neighborhood needs and not listening to citizens' points of view. In addition The Metro Neighborhood Coalition has just issued a statement championing the Jackson group's cause. (The Coalition director was trained in the conflict model and welcomes controversial issues as a means of keeping the Coalition alert and active.) The PTA, the Neighborhood Association, and the Coalition have joined forces and demanded a special meeting with the Board. Reluctantly the Board has agreed. The meeting is scheduled for 2 p.m. Friday in the Board room at the Public School Administration building.

B. Change Agent

Jackson PTA and allies. Role of the change agent is to act as contestant; work to have own side win.

C. Basic Elements in Strategy

Issue dissensus--complete disagreement on whether an issue exists and how an issue is to be resolved.

D. Objective of Change Agent

To cause the Board to rescind its decision to close Jackson School.

Objective of Board

To stand firm on its decision to close Jackson School.

E. Task

Develop a plan for achieving the objective, using the conflict strategy.

The key to the conflict strategy is that there is no consensus about the issue. The Jackson PTA and its allies are at loggerheads with the Board of Education and the issue cannot be resolved by using the collaborative or campaign strategy.

Before making a decision to use the conflict strategy the change agent should consider the risks very systematically, perhaps by using the Risk Technique or Force-Field Analysis and be prepared to accept the consequences. In addition the group should prepare carefully for the confrontation. It is necessary to clearly state the issue and stick to it. This means planning who is going to say and do what. It also means not permitting the other side to cloud the issue by diverting attention to other matters or going off on tangents. However it is also important to plan an up-front and a fall-back position, i.e., a clear and assertive statement of what you want, but also a quiet agreement among your own group as to what you will settle for. This allows room for negotiation.

One author suggests four additional considerations: (1) separate the people from the problem, that is discuss issues, not personalities; (2) focus on interests, not positions, that is, try to relate the conflict to basic human interests and needs, and try to discover interests both sides share; (3) invent options for mutual gain, in an effort to create a situation in which everyone wins something; (4) insist on objective criteria, which enables negotiation on the basis of principle, not pressure.²

If your group has chosen to use the conflict strategy and has been successful, it may be very wise to consider how best to restore a good relationship with the other side. Chances are that the campaign and collaborative strategies may be useful approaches in future relationships.

SUMMARY

The collaborative strategy is appropriate when there is issue consensus; the campaign strategy when there is issue difference; and the conflict strategy when there is issue dissensus. In choosing a strategy a group must also consider its own style, the social environment in which it functions, and the possible consequences of its choice.

¹The basic ideas about the collaborative, campaign, and consensus strategies have been adapted from: Warren, Roland L., Truth, Love, and Social Change, and Other Essays on Community Change. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1971.

²Citizen Participation Newsletter, December, 1982, No. 16 (Morgantown, West Virginia: West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service, 1982) pp. 1-3, citing Fisher and Ury, Getting to Yes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).