

STARTING AN ACTION GROUP

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In a culture where the idea that "bigger is better" rules the thought-waves, it might seem too bold to start a local action group. Still, in your circle or location, that could be just what's needed.

If you know people who believe in something but aren't doing anything about it, a new action group might mobilize them. If you see a situation where an organization that people have counted on has lost its edge — is no longer fresh or creative, and no longer winning victories — that might be a reason to start a new group.

If you see an issue where only one demographic is in motion (youth, or older people, or one social class, or one color, or one set of politics) you might ask yourself: might a new group be able to bring *others* into action?

After all, there are many causes (economic justice, reproductive rights, stopping climate change and others) where a lot more people need to act than are currently in motion.

Think of 1959, when racial discrimination still ruled the South and existing anti-racist groups consisted mostly of the older generations of black people. Four young black college students in North Carolina launched their own, local campaign in 1960 to end segregation at lunch counters; many youths across the South then created local groups.

These initial campaigns ignited a mass struggle and spurred many new action groups that included other generations, white people, blacks in the North, and so on. Existing old-line organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People gained membership and energy as well — a win/win outcome!

Others got the idea: student rights, farm workers, dignity for elders, women's liberation, justice for people who are mentally ill, gay liberation. Environmentalists were so inspired by the ferment that they created locally-based action groups around proposed nuclear power plants *and* — *by the end of the 'seventies through nonviolent direct action – they stopped the ambitious plans of an extremely powerful nuclear power industry.*

WHAT WORKS IN STARTING A SUCCESSFUL NEW ACTION GROUP?

The steps for beginning a group are not really as simple as a recipe, but I'll take the risk of writing this in a recipe-kind of way, counting on the reader to remember that situations are always unique and you'll need to think through each step with friends to adapt to circumstances. Since action strategies are diverse — and the kind of strategy can

influence the kind of group you form — I write for those who want to start a group that can wage a nonviolent direct action campaign. This short article won't be about campaign strategy, though; it will be about starting a group that's strong enough to launch a campaign.

☞ **Ask who holds the vision.** Maybe it's you who can picture what the group will be like when it is up and running. That makes you the "holder of the vision." Maybe that's *not* your gift. Maybe you strongly feel the need for a new group, and you're good at implementing the vision once it becomes clear, but envisioning is not your thing. Be realistic about yourself, and if you're not the vision-holder, find someone who can do that for the group. The vision-holder doesn't need to be the iconic "leader." In fact, it's probably best to drop the idea of THE leader, and instead look for the gifts that, brought together, provide the team leadership your group will need to move forward.

The visionary you want doesn't get lost in detail, doesn't spend a lot of time reasoning things out, doesn't focus their main effort on helping people feel good with each other, and doesn't get impatient when there's not action right away. *The vision-holder is someone who can imagine what the group needs to look like/feel like/sound like when it's up and running, and beyond.* The vision-holder's clarity will be an asset to your group when it could get distracted by the dozens of things that press for attention. If you're lucky, you'll find more than one person with a gift of holding a (common) vision.

☞ **Ask who can analyze the situation, and place it in context.** Maybe it's you who can assemble the factors, list the considerations, get the stats together, track the history of action efforts on the issue. If not, find the person who can research the oppressive structure you're targeting, who can identify the various forces that are contending with each other and assess their strengths. Maybe you'll be lucky and find more than one analyst.

☞ **Ask who can "make the rubber hit the road."** A group may have a vision and an analysis and never become an action group because it gets lost in generating options and doing cost-benefit analyses! To have action, you need someone who can mobilize others to *decide* on a plan (not endlessly debate it) *and then implement it.* Maybe that's you. Maybe you personally have a "To do" list that you check off rigorously and get satisfaction out of getting things done promptly even when obstacles get in the way. Maybe you can even get competitive and take extra pride in "getting there first" — that's fine, as long as it doesn't subvert the needs of the group.

On the other hand, maybe being a "take-charge implementer" isn't really you, and you need to find one or more people who bring those gifts. You'll never be an action group without the sort of woman who led her basketball team to victory, or the sort of man who got his high school friends to jump in a car and head to a nearby city for a demonstration or a rock concert.

☞ **Ask who can tune in to the feelings of others.** There are plenty of groups that have had the analyst and visionary and in-charge activist but have gotten demoralized and split because they had no one to provide "glue," to notice the underlying conflicts that needed to surface, to pay attention to the individuals on the margin who were being overlooked in the excitement. Maybe you have this gift, the skill of being a shepherd who looks after the flock and resolves conflict before it blows up in everyone's face. There's an age-old maxim that still works in the Internet age: every successful group has at least one person who keeps track of the membership as a whole. If you don't have this gift, find a couple of people who do and explain to them their importance. For some reason shepherds often down-rate their own importance; let them know they have a key part to play.

Affinity groups come and go; the successful ones include (usually by luck) the four roles of visionary, analyst, driver/warrior, and shepherd in their group. The purpose of this article is to save you the time and disappointment of relying on hit-or-miss approaches like assembling a random collection of your friends in a room and hoping you can get a successful group out of it.

☞ Once you know that the people in the room include all four of the gifts that successful groups need, then **take some time to consolidate your victory**, because it is your first victory. Your opponent will try to destroy you, if you are bold and smart, so take the time to do some bonding. One metaphor in the field of organizing is the snowball: if you pack it tight, it will attract other snow when you roll it down the hill and you'll end up with an amazing snowperson! If you don't pack it tight, it will attract very little, and go nowhere.

☞ **As prospective members of your group are getting to know each other, beware of letting friendship be the tail that wags the dog.** Some groups start with such a high priority on *inclusiveness* that they fail to accomplish anything important – they don't achieve the clarity or focus to be edgy or consequential. (Personally, when I join a new project some of my best friends may not choose to join, and that's fine with me because friendship has its own reason for being. Some would rather cheer me on and support me from outside the group than be conflicted or half-hearted inside the group.) So, as the people you gather into the room do their elaborate and subtle dance with each other, know that some will leave, and should. Better your group should stand for something, than that it should stand for anything.

☞ **Leadership and decision-making are on people's minds whether they mention it or not, so you might as well raise it to the surface.** Talk about what will support the vision for the group. Consider what will empower the group members, and the kinds of members you want to attract. Try to avoid simplistic polarizations or ritual political correctness that prevents later effectiveness. Although I've had great successes with consensus decision-making and shared leadership, I've also started successful organizations with defined leadership roles and the possibility of taking votes. It depends

on who I want in the room, what their backgrounds are, and what expectations I encounter. Ironically, consensus decision-making can disempower and even exclude some people, depending on a lot of factors. Easy answers are no longer available for a diversity-friendly activist; we have to think each situation out carefully and constantly go back to our bottom-line goals.

☞ **Part of the bonding is clarifying your mission.** Do you want to be all things to all people? (You'll fail.) Do you want to add an ingredient that's missing in the array of organizations now working on the issue? Do you want to work in a way that shows the connections among a number of different issues, or do you want to focus first on a particular issue and make a difference there? How can you make your mission clear enough that you'll know whether you're making or losing ground? How can you make your purpose clear enough so that the group can readily reject some "bright ideas" because they don't happen to fit into the mission of the group?

☞ **Clarify your niche in the ecology of social movements.** Every group has a context, and you can save yourself needless trouble and enhance your success by letting your "big picture participants" (analysts and visionaries) guide the group on this point. Who are your nearest organizational neighbors in your system? What might your neighbors think about your asserting yourself as a new group? What conversations do you need to have with them, both to reduce their fears/resentments and to teach you how to present yourselves with greater clarity? What are the possibilities of alliance at particular points? They may have expertise, skills, contacts, credibility that could be useful to you and they might like to lend them for reasons of their own. You might have something you can offer at some points in your campaign.

Remember that some members of your action group can get deflected from your true opponent into wasting their energy bad-mouthing another organization in the movement; such deflection brings everyone down and robs you of your full potential. In the late 1950s two smart organizations pursuing very different strategies against the nuclear arms race made an agreement that they would refrain from public attacks on each other and would position themselves to reduce the amount their members engaged in divisive, energy-sapping activity. Having both of the stylistically-different groups increased the total popular involvement in the movement, and made synergy happen. They won their first campaign, too: the atmospheric nuclear test ban treaty.

☞ **Map your first campaign.** Put your analysts to work and identify some "easy" options to choose among, because, for a new group, nothing succeeds like success. A goal may be easier because public opinion is already on your side, or strong organizations already in the field are working on it and have done a lot of the research and action experimentation needed, or the injustice going on is so outrageous that even some of the other side's allies are deserting their cause.

The "target" is defined as the person or entity that can meet your demands. You might choose a goal because the target is vulnerable for whatever reasons and is therefore more likely to meet your demands.

Another consideration in choosing your campaign is your "constituency" — the people who you want to resonate with your campaign, support it, and even become members. Some campaigns will be more likely than others to speak to those who you want to reach. You also need to think about the skills and experience of your group members. Maybe they don't happen to have much background in nonviolent direct action, and therefore it would be smart for your group to ally itself with a more-experienced group so you can pick up the skills and experience you need.

Because the choice of the first campaign is so critical to the success of your group, it often pays to call in a veteran organizer/trainer to facilitate a strategy retreat for your group. A successful strategy comes from balancing many considerations, and that skill of balancing is unusual to find in a new group — even if the group has some members who are highly experienced! (It's the newness of the group that makes it difficult to hold in its collective mind the many strategic considerations and to balance them successfully.) Of course even long-time groups benefit from having their strategic retreats facilitated by an outsider, but it's especially valuable for a new group.

☞ **Take a risk.** You took the initiative, maybe with a partner or friend, to gather the ingredients for your new action group. So *you're* the logical person to model risk-taking! Why? Because even groups with transformational goals may have a conservative streak, a natural aversion to risk. *And risk is what effective action almost always requires!* So you need to initiate a culture in your group that supports risk-taking, by taking a visible risk!

Additional ways to build what is often called a "culture of resistance" (I prefer more proactive terms) include having movie nights with popcorn in which your group watches stirring examples of risk-taking in campaigns (I recommend, for example, *Freedom Song*), and making sure your analysts always have a stockpile of stories from historic figures who took risks at strategic times. Groups always evolve a culture of some kind, as your shepherds will tell you, so experiment to find out if your group resonates to singing, spoken word, or other cultural expressions that bring the heart fully and frankly into the group.

Understand that a group culture that extols "cool" is not only going to be diversity-unfriendly (unattractive to working class people, some people of color, and so on.) "Cool" also undermines the group's own capacity to act courageously and creatively, with a full heart. Those witty cynicisms that some members compulsively bring to the room do not create the discourse that propels to action, so you might try suggesting that they send that kind of wit to the Internet instead. An action group needs to sound more like a

sports team than a cocktail party!

**EXAMPLE OF ONE VERSION OF THE ABOVE PRINCIPLES:
EARTH QUAKER ACTION TEAM (EQAT)**

EQAT (pronounced "equate") started in 2010 because, although there was a lot of existing concern about climate change, no Quaker group was doing nonviolent direct action campaigns. EQAT founders wanted the Quaker name and legacy to be brought into confrontive action not only because action forces powerholders to change their policies, but also to remind everyone that the revolutionary DNA of the Society of Friends has a place in today's struggles. In the formation of EQAT long and substantial dialogue was held with Quaker environmentalists to clarify the niche that EQAT would occupy.

The group started by attracting analysts, visionaries, shepherds, and warriors, who attended a day-long workshop on direct action campaigning to begin the bonding and internal organizing process. The group soon created formal leadership roles, a committee structure, and its first campaign: BLAM! (*Bank Like Appalachia Matters!*), focusing on mountaintop-removal coal mining (MTR).

Considerations in choosing the initial campaign included:

- economic justice meets climate justice (Appalachian poverty and anti-labor practices),
- the value of solidarity,
- an achievable goal: stopping mountain-top removal,
- a "big sister" to ally with (Rainforest Action Network), to learn skills and gain support,
- a vulnerable target: PNC Bank (funding MTR while calling itself a "green" bank),
- PNC Bank's origins as a bank started by Quakers (resonance for constituency),
- a target in the financial sector, an industry blatantly failing most Americans.

The group's bonding happened not only through committee work, frequent listserv communication, and Quaker ritual, but also through celebrations. The actions were planned to be heart-filled and dramatic (no vigils or rallies!), so the actions were also a source of community-building. Several founders of EQAT quickly engaged in civil disobedience in the first arrestible action. The group is multi-racial and its age range is 14-80, although the largest subgroup is young adults.

Seven months after EQAT's first action, PNC Bank made a significant concession, due, it said, to "public pressure." Members donned jobbing outfits and ran to the regional headquarters to acknowledge PNC's first step in what EQAT calls a "marathon" whose finish line is giving up all fossil fuels.

More information and videos: Earth Quaker Action Team website: www.greenpnc.org

George Lakey has helped start a variety of groups including Men Against Patriarchy, the Movement for a New Society, and Training for Change. His first arrest was for a civil rights sit-in. His most recent book is *Facilitating Group Learning* published by Jossey-Bass, 2010, and he teaches at Swarthmore College where he is a research fellow at the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility. Reach him at glakey1@swarthmore.edu.