

How to Fight City Hall

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Does the utility company treat you unfairly? Are you being pushed around by giant developers, the bank or the government? Is your community threatened by pollution? If you feel like one of the little people being stepped on by “the powers that be,” you’re not alone. But if you feel there’s nothing you can do about it, you’re not paying attention to the groundswell of grass-roots activism taking place in America today.

Take the following examples:

☒ A year ago in Bucks County, Pa., the Philadelphia Electric Company began excavation for a controversial pumping station that would have harmed the Delaware River and disrupted the way of life of an entire community. Today, after waves of civil disobedience, pickets, rallies, and a courthouse occupation followed by a successful referendum campaign and county election, construction (despite millions invested) has been ordered

Reprinted from *Parade Magazine* with permission. shut down, and most observers agree the project will never see the light of day.

☒ In Anson County, N.C., a black and white alliance called CACTUS recently outfought the state chemical industry and blocked a mammoth waste dump.

☒ In Minnesota, a grass-roots organization called COACT, using a combination of direct action and political lobbying, has stopped scores of farm foreclosures.

☒ In San Francisco, a broad-based coalition has made some progress in limiting high-rise development, while on New York City’s west side, a highway project has been held off for more than 10 years.

The people winning these battles don’t sit around complaining about apathy; instead, they are actively “doing democracy.” That’s right—doing democracy. Democracy is more than a place you live in, more than a belief. Democracy is a skill, something you learn and do. You don’t do it, you don’t have it. It’s not inevitable that the little people triumph, but neither is it true that the powerful few at the top are unshakable.

For the last seven years, I’ve been starting and advising many grass-roots groups working on environmental issues. Before that, I had a long history in the civil rights and antiwar movements. Let me share with you some of the commonsense ideas and tricks of the trade that I’ve picked up along the way.

BEGIN WITH THE PROPER STATE OF MIND. You must feel strongly that, if you put time and energy into a thought-out campaign, you will prevail.

GET INTO THE FIGHT AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE. Keep abreast of what’s going on in your community. Be on the lookout for public hearings, sudden requests to change zoning variances or attempts to deregulate industries. Understand that “studies” are often a smokescreen for beginning a project. One of the ironies of organizing is that it is much easier to get people active once a project has begun, but by then it may be too late to win.

At the earliest stage, you might even be able to go on the offensive. Some groups defending waterways have managed to get Congress to designate areas under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. You might win an ordinance prohibiting toxic waste dumping or limiting the height of buildings, an impediment to downtown developers. By pushing for local restrictions, you stimulate early debate as well as lay groundwork for the future battle and put your opponents on the defensive.

THERE IS STRENGTH IN NUMBERS. Talk to your neighbors, attend public hearings, listen to community talk shows, scan the letters to the editor column. Get names and phone numbers. You want to avoid the sort of people depicted in the movie *Network*, those who run to the window shouting, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore.” Certainly it’s right and natural to be angry, but the anger must be controlled and directed.

Avoid people who get scared by words like “power,” “conflict,” and “confrontation.” Many people get involved for religious or social reasons— both perfectly legitimate motives—but for spearheading a campaign, those people who understand the nature of politics are best suited to making strategy. The status quo sits like a layer of fat on cold chicken soup—your nucleus has to be willing to stir things up.

TAKE YOUR CASE TO THE PEOPLE. Public meetings are the bread and butter of all organizing. It's essential to create an atmosphere that's not intimidating so as to allow for free and open comment, but you should have some answers ready. A key to mounting a successful campaign rests on your ability to convert problem-presenters to problem-solvers. Break down generalities into limited goals. Saying, "We don't have enough money" is just depressing. But saying, "We need \$1000 for ads. I've raised \$100 already," starts a process with a specific target.

The more experience I have, the more I favor parliamentary procedure and majority rule. The argument against this method of decision-making maintains that a small clique experienced with the ground rules can control the will of the group. But a determined few can just as easily control decisions under any set of procedures. Besides debating skills, the ability to negotiate, to form alliances and to direct discussion to a specific motion are all of great importance when confronting opponents.

Don't overlook simple business operating procedures just because this is volunteer work. Pass out pads and pencils. A simple form listing vital statistics—such as hours available, skills and resources—breaks the ice with new people. At meetings, get into a good news/bad news rhythm of reporting. Good news lifts sagging spirits. Bad news reminds you of the need to improve your organizing skills.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE INTERNAL WORKINGS OF YOUR GROUP. The majority of citizens' groups collapse within a year as a result of divisions, poor leadership and a general sense of frustration and inertia. By always asking, "Does this bring victory closer?" you can help motivate and bring a group together.

It's very important to be supportive of your fellow activists. Controversy attracts public attention. Challenging the "powers that be" often forces people to painfully re-examine long-held misconceptions, and leaders often find themselves on a lonely limb. Most groups fall down, however, not because they fail to support each other but because they are unwilling or unable to engage in self-criticism. Constructive criticism of ideas and tactics without being judgmental of individuals is more easily said than done. But how else do we improve?

BE VERY CONSCIOUS OF YOUR LANGUAGE. It cannot be stressed too strongly how much language shapes our environment. Language should be action-oriented, exciting, creative, simple and upbeat. Try to imagine yourself as someone creating an advertising campaign. Activists who carry around some prejudice that all advertising is deceitful, who feel that emphasizing form threatens the integrity of content really miss the essential nature of communication. You can't afford the luxury of being boring or of creating a language that the average person cannot understand. Avoid, for example, using initials for the full name of an agency. Even if all the people you are addressing know that EPA stands for Environmental Protection Agency (if they all do, you are not talking to enough people), say the full name. Why? As a reminder not to slip into the language of the bureaucracy. Those in power can, but not the challengers.

AVOID ANALYSIS-PARALYSIS. Read through reports, proposals and studies with the eye of a detective. Look for clues to prove your case, ammunition to destroy the opposition. But be careful not to get intimidated by "facts"—or use them to intimidate others. Don't get bogged down because you feel you don't know enough to act. Also, a sense of humor is your best guard against burning out of energy and ideas.

There is no end to information-gathering. Often, as your reputation grows, people will literally pop out of the woodwork with bits of information. Don't assume your opponents are united; look behind the public relations people. The Freedom of Information Act and various state sunshine laws allow the public access to otherwise secret correspondence and minutes of meetings. Even where no such access laws exist, officials often believe they do, and a good bluff on the phone might quickly get scores of documents.

Information and support are also available from national groups. Even if their support is nothing more than a letter, people like to feel part of something bigger, and opponents get very nervous when you go beyond their turf.

THINK IN TERMS OF TEAM SPORTS OR WAR. Shifting from analysis to action means changing roles from that of a detective to that of a coach or general. By mapping out allies, potential allies and the opposition, by scanning the field repeatedly for strengths and weaknesses on both sides, you are making abstract ideas concrete. Many people have a philosophical resistance to creating a “them” and an “us,” to seeing things in black and white. Such an attitude of “oneness” might feel good, but not when you are challenging the process of decision-making.

ALWAYS GET THE LAST WORD. In presenting your case, don’t let a good question go unanswered. Chances are a lot of other people are asking the same question. And never let opponents get the last word in any debate. If you get stumped, make sure it never happens again on the same point. Unfortunately, the majority of groups find themselves in the position of simply saying “No!” Work hard to develop an alternative—“No! We have a better idea”—and include an economic argument.

A LITTLE RUDENESS HELPS. Getting through bureaucracies means being persistent and a little pushy. Remember that manners were invented by kings to maintain power. The determination to interrupt business as usual is often misunderstood as ill-mannered. Don’t let the “king” define your behavior.

YOUR ABILITY TO MAKE NEWS IS, AT CRUCIAL STAGES, YOUR MOST IMPORTANT GOAL. The opposition would much rather go about its business secretly. Those who support you want to be assured that things are happening. The media only want to know the answers to three questions: Who are you? Why are you so upset? What are you going to do about it? Role-play among each other, playing reporter and information source. Be quick, to the point and suspenseful.

THINK EGOCENTRICALLY. Take the daily newspaper and draw a circle around every story in which you can make a connection to your issue. I mean everything! On the Delaware, a kid once saved someone who crash- landed in the river. Knowing he would be news, we rushed to feed him the line. “I hope someone will now save the river from the pump.” If a politician is coming to town, rush to the event and ask a key question. A good organizer is constantly on the move, constantly on the telephone. Practice by calling random names from the telephone book, posing as some neutral survey worker polling on the issue. When an article appears in the newspaper, call the paper’s switchboard and register your feelings.

SEARCH FOR ALLIES. It’s a big world out there. What’s bad for your group has to be bad for others. Look hard for the most common denominator you share. Only approach others for support when you have a specific, immediate request you’re fairly sure will be honored . . . then ask for a little more.

People in general *do* believe in fair play, but what really motivates them is self-interest. If you can’t spell out how the policy or project affects the person you’re addressing, try someone else.

DON’T RULE OUT ANYTHING. Should you picket? Stage a rally? Run candidates? Go to court? There are hundreds of strategy options. Imagination. Surprise. Mobility. These are the advantages you have over your opponent in the field. Remember, at every step of the way, you have to ask, “Is this bringing us closer to victory?”

So how do people “do democracy” ? They do it by acting out the roles they always dreamed of playing. Dramatist. Detective. General. Football coach. Preacher. Democracy means having the courage and persistence to make the dreams of free people come true.



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