

# The Art of Advocacy

Three Essential Questions  
for Planning Strategy

the  
**democracycenter**

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# Introduction

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory.  
Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”

– *Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

Democracy without activism is a hollow thing. Activism is about all of us, looking together at the world around us, seeing what’s wrong and taking action together to make it right. At the Democracy Center, for 25 years, we have worked with people all across the world on a key part of activism, advocacy, working together to demand and achieve specific action from governments, corporations and other institutions of power.

But how do we make sure that our advocacy is as effective and powerful as it can be? A key to that is

acting strategically – moving beyond just tactics and actions to a wider view that threads all those activities together into something coherent and powerful. In our work across the world these 25 years we have learned that there is no one approach to making our advocacy strategic, but there is a set of three universal questions that every advocacy effort must ask of itself and answer in a clear and thoughtful way:

- I. What do you want?
- II. What does the political map look like?
- III. What is your plan of action to win?

# I. What do You Want?

If a group of friends decide to climb to the top of a mountain together, it's important before they begin to point at the peak they aim to scale and agree that's where they want to go. Otherwise, they might just end up walking around in the woods for a day without any clear destination. Advocacy is much the same. If you want your hard effort to achieve something then you need to be clear what that goal is at the start, otherwise you might just get lost in your own tangle of actions that don't lead anywhere. Defining and being clear about what you want is about three basic things:

## 1. What is the problem you are trying to solve?

Advocacy is about seeing a problem and setting out to solve it. It might be as narrow and local as getting your town to tackle local pollution or as large and global as taking action on the climate crisis. It might be deaths from police shootings or battling poverty. In every case, it is essential at the start to name that problem in a clear, understandable and compelling way, and to make sure others understand why it is a problem.

## 2. What is the solution you are proposing?

What is it that will actually solve the problem? Not, what you hope will solve the problem, or what will look good to advocate, or what might be easy to win – but what in the long-term is actually required to get the job done? Even though that long-term solution may be out of reach right now, it is still critical to have that vision in at least a rough form. Without it you won't be able to tell along the way whether what you are doing is actually building toward the solution you believe in.

## 3. What are the shorter-term objectives that build toward that vision?

In advocacy as in life, few big picture goals are won outright or quickly. Most are won piece-by piece through a series of objectives that build on each other – local actions that go national, partial victories that enable fuller ones. Activists have to have an answer to the question: What are we fighting for now and how does that build momentum? Near-term objectives that build toward longer-terms ones share a set of common characteristics. They put the issue on the public agenda, they attract the kinds of alliances you need to build for the longer-term, and they create policies and processes that give you a base that can be expanded upon.

## II. What does the Political Map Look Like?

In an advocacy campaign, in between the place where you begin and the goal you are trying to achieve, lies a path filled with obstacles to be overcome, opportunities to be seized and most especially a constellation of complex actors and institutions you need to join with or move. Mapping those actors and those dynamics is as critical step as analyzing what you see. Taking action in advocacy without doing that mapping is just as foolish as a chess player making a move without looking at the board. In advocacy strategy that analysis comes in three steps:

### 1. What has the authority and who else wields significant influence?

In almost every instance there will be some person or institution that has the formal authority to do (or not do) the thing you want done. Knowing who that is, with accuracy and clarity, is vital. Everything you do is ultimately aimed at getting whomever that is to do what you want.

In turn, that person's or that institution's decision will be heavily influenced by a wide range of other actors – corporations, the media, citizen groups, unions, political donors or others. At the start, activists need to identify all of these key actors who will affect the success or failure of their efforts.

### 2. Where does each of these actors stand in terms of both their position and their power?

With the identification of these different actors in hand, activist campaigns can then map out the politics they are dealing with through a grid akin to the one below, looking at where all these actors stand

on the issue (supportive or opposed) and how much power they have (powerful or not powerful).

This 'power grid', with all the relevant actors mapped, offers a potent visual image of the field of advocacy battle and serves as an indispensable tool for planning strategy.

### 3. Based on that map, what are your strategic priorities?

As you look at that mapping, what does it tell you about the strategic priorities for advancing your objectives? Who it is that has power that you most need to convince to take your side? Who is on your side that you need to help make more powerful or work with in a deeper alliance? Who is powerful and against you that you most need to undermine or block? Strategic activism is also about setting priorities and a mapping exercise like this helps offer a clear-eyed view of what you are dealing with so that you can set your priorities based on that insight.

# III. What is Your Plan of Action to Win?

With a clear sense of your objectives and a careful analysis of the political complexities your advocacy needs to navigate, then it is possible to plan your tactics and actions in a thoughtful and well-grounded way. Three other planning questions sit at the center as you plan your way forward:

## 1. Messaging: How will you talk about your issue?

Whether carried out by news release or public protest, advocacy is about communicating something to someone. Making those messages strategic and smart from the start is critical. Audience by audience (the public, the media, lawmakers, etc.) what are the messages that express your objectives in the most powerful way possible? How can you blend information and human stories together into something genuinely compelling? How do you make your messages clear and understandable? How can you repeat them over and over again in every opportunity possible? A campaign's well-crafted messaging is its sheet music and it needs to be developed with care.

## 2. What activities and actions will you carry out to advance your objective?

Picking your actions and activities strategically is like going to a restaurant and choosing what to eat - first you look at your options. What's on the menu (what are all actions possible to do)? What matches your tastes of the moment (which actions do you think will have the most impact)? How much have you got in your wallet (what activities do you actually have the capacity to carry out)? Just as you wouldn't order lunch without seeing what your choices are, it doesn't make sense to set your plan of action without evaluating all your options and picking the mix

that makes the most sense in the situation you are in. Many times activists just fall back on the tactics that are familiar, from issuing reports to staging direct actions. This trap of staying in your comfort zone of tactics that are familiar is like an old saying: If you have a hammer everything looks like a nail. What is familiar may not necessarily be the thing that makes most sense to do.

## 3. How can you tell along the way if your strategy is actually working?

In the end even the most adept advocacy strategy is not a guarantee of success. It is an educated guess. Along the way that guess needs to be looked at over and over to see if it can be made better based on its encounters with reality. Did you hit a wall that you didn't anticipate in advance? Has some new opportunity presented itself that is a surprise? Does your strategy still hold? Are your tactics having the impact you hoped? What are the mid-course corrections that make sense along the way? Advocacy in motion is a tricky thing to evaluate because its progress comes in fits and starts, not a slow and steady rise. On Monday it might look like your efforts of a long time have failed; then on Tuesday you suddenly win everything you've fought for. But regardless, devising a plan to evaluate your progress along the way is also a part of acting strategically.