

10 Tips for a Successful Social Action

From the Women and Girls Foundation
of Southwest Pennsylvania
www.wgfsdpa.org

1. Know what you want. Be specific.

Your goal certainly can be a large social change objective (world peace, equal rights, the end of global poverty), but your immediate social action should be a tangible action which if achieved would be a stepping stone to achieving your larger goal. While your objective is the big picture social actions are most successful when they are asking, demanding, or negotiating for a concrete deliverable or systemic change to happen.

Example: If your objective is world peace, then your social action might be the drafting and signing of a peace treaty between the United States, the Iraqi Government, and the leadership of the Insurgent movement by June 2007.

2. Build a Coalition.

Start building a broad based coalition early in the process. This should involve people in all sectors – non-profit, corporate, and government, men and women, young and older people, different religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, politics, as varied as your coalition is the stronger its roots in the community will be and the broader your base. Engage the coalition in all steps of the process, get them to help you go from concept stage to tactical stage. Don't "make them feel included" – INCLUDE THEM!

3. Research, Plan, Develop

Research what other models exist for what you are proposing to do? Who has succeeded? Who has failed? What lessons can you learn from what they did right and what you can do better? We can learn just as much from what didn't work as what did so this is a great learning phase. The research you do will make your choice of action an informed choice, and will help you outline and develop a clear plan of action.

4. Take Action

Okay, so it might seem premature but you do not want to become one of those groups that just talk and talk and meet and talk and never DO anything. So, at this stage, when you have a good size diverse coalition in place, when you have done your research and articulated exactly what you want, take some form of action. Hold a rally, a press conference, a briefing for elected officials on your issue, set up meetings with stakeholder and decision makers, draft your peace treaty, legislation etc., and move forward.

5. Have Patience

Not all change happens in a few hours or a few days or months. Real change takes a long time. So, we have to be patient. But not too patient because we don't want to get comfortable with the status quo. So, we have to be vigilant and patient. We have to keep momentum going while we stay realistic about what is possible. So, if you hit an obstacle, use that opportunity to go back to the coalition, do more research, and brainstorm and research your way around the obstacle. The good thing about broad based coalitions is that you have a lot of brains in the room so be sure to activate and engage them all in problem solving.

6. Expand Your Coalition

At this stage, with some minor successes under your belt, and perhaps having encountered some opposition and/or backlash, it is smart to grow your coalition. If it has been local, go to the state level. If you have been working stateside maybe it is time to connect to national partners, if you have mainly been working with one type of person (parents, union members, women, non-profit leaders, members of only one political party) now really is the time to develop new relationships. If you re-evaluate your action and your goals and objectives are clear but you can not seem to move forward try to engage more people into the project. Odds are they are going to bring new skills and perspectives to the situation and that will help you creatively map next steps.

7. Engage the Opposition

Some of the new relationships we mentioned in #6 are going to come from your opposition. If you are hitting up against an opposition now is the time to figure out how to engage the people who are putting obstacles in your path. Go straight to the source in a small meeting face to face. Learn more about the opposition; leadership, staff, stakeholders, what is their base of power, what is their position, what is important to them, what do they need? You need to learn the answers to these questions so that you can find your common ground and engage the opposition in a deep conversation to see if you might be able to negotiate a resolution.

8. Do not compromise...NEGOTIATE!

Before you begin discussions with the opposition make sure that you have consensus among the key leaders of your coalition as to what is non-negotiable and what is. You don't want to be in a position of compromising your principals and big picture objectives for short term gain. On the other hand there may be components of your initial project that can be negotiated (when the treaty is signed, who is involved, when it takes effect...). Looking for opportunities to negotiate can develop of conversation – and getting people to the table to talk is a good first step. Before entering into a negotiation also make sure you know (and can articulate) what your source of bargaining power is (votes, media/public pressure, PAC support, etc..) and who from your coalition can serve as trusted bridges to the opposition.

9. Take it to the next level.

Once you reach an agreement keep things moving forward in a timely fashion. If you have a good meeting follow it up with a written proposal of next steps, if you have a media success figure out how to leverage that to get the people or bodies that you are trying to influence to listen to you, if you have had a local success think about how you can replicate that at the state or national level. If this has been an effective coalition work hard to keep it together, continue to work on efforts together and track and implement the successes you have achieved.

10. Win!

Play to win. This goes back to our first tip regarding knowing what you want and making it something tangible. Something that will have impact. Something you can build upon. A successful social action takes time, energy, money, passion, and can strain the resources of any good non-profit so if you are going to engage in advocacy – and we hope that you do – plan to be in it for the long haul and plan to invest the resources in the effort to be successful.

This list was created with input from tons of people through the years that have helped teach us about best practices in advocacy. If you have any questions about who we are or what we do please check out our website www.wgfsdpa.org or call us at 412-434-4883.