



CHOOSING ISSUES: WINNING VICTORIES

CHOOSE AN ISSUE THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

1. Will it win victories In people's lives?

When all is said and done, will people be able to point to a meaningful, positive, qualitative change in their lives that occurred because you took on this issue and won?

It is not enough to merely get press coverage or to be granted a meeting with a public official, they are simply a means to an end. A victory, a measurable improvement, enables people to say, for example, "Wow, I couldn't sit at the front of the bus last year, but now I can."

2. Does it fill a gap?

Is there an unanswered need that your group will meet by working on this issue? Are you only duplicating existing efforts, or are you truly filling in where you will be most useful? It is important to note that lending needed assistance to an existing issue is a way to help fill gaps.

CHOOSE AN ISSUE THAT IS FOCUSED.

3. Is the issue in fact winnable?

In choosing an issue, be sure you are actually choosing an issue that has can be solved. Ending poverty all at once is not winnable; but changing a specific law, or voting an official out of office may be winnable issues. Keep in mind, however, that issues range in size and in nature. You will have to determine what is manageable for your group according to your interests, experience and resources.

4. Is it easy to understand?

If you can't reduce the thrust of the argument to a paragraph, it's probably too complex to engage people in the fight. Choosing an issue that's easy to understand also increases the likelihood of potentially useful media coverage.

5. Do you have a clear target and specific goals?

A particular politician is a clear target; "The government" is not. You need a clear, specific target so that you can concentrate your energies and have the greatest impact. However, a clear target will not be enough unless you have specific goals which your target can satisfy. You can't just meet with your police commissioner and make a general demand for "an end to police brutality." Well, actually you can; but if you do, he may not know how to help you even if he wants to. If, on the other hand, you present him with a specific proposal for the establishment of a civilian review board, you've given her a concrete action which you can prevail upon her to take.

6. Do you have a clear time frame?

A clear time frame gives you specific deadlines. Some are decided internally, others, like electoral calendars, you have no control over. A timeline forces you to consider how much time certain goals will require. Election Day and the end of the fiscal year are examples of deadlines which mark a clear time frame.

CHOOSE AN ISSUE THAT WILL GARNER SUPPORT.

7. Is it widely felt?

Large numbers of supporters win credibility for your issue with elected officials, media and potential supporters. It is wise to choose an issue for which many people have a personal stake in your group's success.

8. Is it deeply felt?

The issue must not only be felt by a large enough number of people; it must also run deep with many of these people. Everyone in a neighborhood may be affected if a certain supermarket does not have the best selection of produce, but nobody will meet with the mayor about it. On the other hand, if there are dangerous chemicals in the town's water supply, that issue runs deep enough to turn everyday people into activists.

9. Is the issue captivating?

It's easier to bring people on board and win people over when your issue captures their excitement. It's hard to get people excited about parking tickets, for example.

10. Does the issue have media saliency?

Does it lend itself to positive and productive media coverage? It's a lot easier to win when you select and tailor an issue to be covered positively by the media. Media advocacy is one the most effective tools for creating public awareness and influencing the actions of everyday people as well as political leaders.

11. Is it non-divisive?

Can you unite people both inside and outside your group around this issue? This does not mean you must pick an issue with which all human beings agree. And the few you might find aren't really "issues." Picking a non-divisive issue means choosing something that your organization and supporters will want to fight for. Indeed, you must be able to present a united front to your opponents.

12. Can the issue be the basis for a viable coalition?

Most successful advocacy efforts are comprised of multiple organizations sharing a common interest. Are there potential allies on your issue that can offer resources, credibility, or visibility? Viable coalitions must center on an issue which is vital to the self-interests of all parties to the coalition. Your coalition should involve people you mutually respect and no one party should make decisions for the others if the alliance is to remain healthy.

13. Will the Issue generate money or the equivalent of money?

Monetary and other resources are always critical, so pick an issue for which they are within reach. Can you develop strategies for acquiring what you need? Remember, you may not always need money itself; sometimes pro-bono donations of time or radio air-time will serve you even better.

CHOOSE AN ISSUE THAT WILL LEAVE BEHIND A LEGACY.

14. Will it make people aware of their own power?

Long-lasting, productive change comes about when the people it benefits were involved in finding the solutions. Will the community come away feeling a victory has been won by them, or by outsiders?

15. Will it alter the relations of power?

In order to have lasting impact, you want institutional change. You don't want your powerful target to merely throw you a bone and hope you'll go away, you want your targets to actually change their minds about your issue. This means not only winning one round of "the game", but changing the way the game is played. Getting justice for a single police brutality victim through the existing channels, while important, does not alter the relations of power; forcing a city to establish civilian review boards to make the police accountable to the people they serve, however, does.

16. Will it build leadership?

It is important that your campaign provides opportunities for people to take on leadership roles. The continuity of a movement depends upon the leaders it builds. Does your issue offer the chance for people to emerge through their own strengths as leaders? Does it provide people with skills or experiences that they did not have before?

17. Will it set you up well for the next issue?

Does it create a core of supporters who are ready and eager to tackle related issues? It should lay the groundwork for the next fight, bringing lots of contacts and possibly funders. Leave the door open and remember those contacts for future issues. You may also have generated lists of people in key positions, volunteer lists, or mailing lists, all of which are extremely useful for when you move to the next issue.

18. Does the Issue fit well with your group's resources and unique concerns?

Resources can be any number of things: contacts, experience, diversity, youth, energy, money, etc. To maximize your chances for success, figure out what resources you have and select an issue that makes good use of them.

These criteria are consistent with the teachings of many experienced community organizers and public interest advocates. This particular list has been shaped by the experiences and needs of Public Allies. However, we owe most of these concepts and much of the language to two invaluable resources:

Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990s by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max of the Midwest Academy, published by Seven Locks Press, Washington, DC, 1991.

Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, published by Random House, New York, NY, 1967.