

RETHINK HEALTH

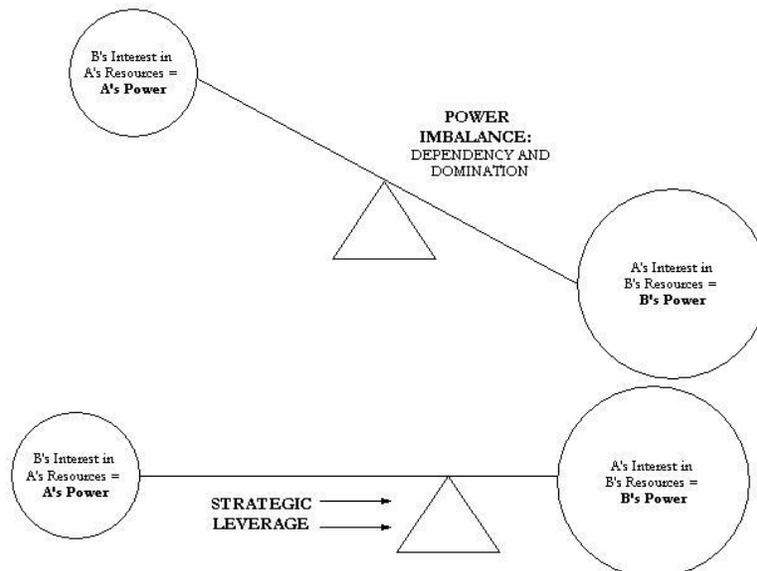
ORGANIZING NOTES ON STRATEGIZING

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INTRODUCTION

Strategy is about turning “what you have” into “what you need” to get “what you want” – how we turn resources into power. If we think of power as the influence one actor can exercise over another because of an imbalance in interests and resources, as shown in strategy Chart 1, one way to correct the imbalance is to aggregate more resources. That’s why people form unions, advocacy organizations, or nations. But another way to correct the imbalance is to move the fulcrum on which the balance rests to get more leverage out of the same resources. This is what good strategists learn to do – get more leverage from the resources that ARE available. Power is thus a matter not only of resources but also of resourcefulness. And because organizers try to change things, they often have to rely on resourcefulness to compensate for their lack of access to resources.

Chart 1



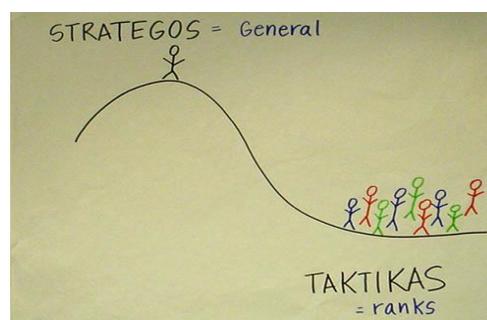
STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Strategizing is a kind of imagining. It is the conceptual link leaders make between the places, the times, and the ways they mobilize and deploy resources and the goals they hope to achieve by this mobilization. It is a way of framing specific choices within a broader framework of meaning.

The word strategy comes from Greek for general – *strategos*. When armies were about to clash on the plane below, the general (Chart 2) went up to the top of the hill and, with the goal of winning the battle, evaluated resources on both sides, reflected on opportunities and constraints imposed by the battle field, and how to deploy troops in ways most likely to achieve his goal. A good *strategos* not only had a good overview of the field. He also had intimate knowledge of the capacities of his men and those of his opponent, details of streams and bridges, and mastery of both the forest and the trees. Once the battle was underway, however, the best *strategos* was often back on the battlefield where he could adjust the plan as conditions changed.

The *taktikas* were the individual ranks of soldiers with specific competencies whom the *strategos* deployed to take specific actions at specific times and places. Tactics are specific actions through which strategy is implemented. Tactics are no less important than strategy, but they are different. A *strategos* with an excellent overview, but who misjudges the competence of his *taktikas* would be lost. Getting results, taking initiative successfully, requires developing the capacity for good strategy and good tactics.

Chart 2



STRATEGIC ACTION

Strategy is about turning “what you have” into “what you need” to get “what you want” – figuring out how to use the resources you have to achieve your goals in light of given constraints and opportunities (Chart 3). Strategic action is a way of acting, not an alternative to acting. It is acting with intentionality and mindfulness of one’s goals, as opposed to acting out

of habit or impulse. So devising strategy is an ongoing activity, not simply a matter of making a "strategic plan" at the beginning of a campaign and then sticking to it. Planning (getting an overview of the plane) is useful in helping those responsible for leading the organization arrive at a common vision of where they want to go and how they hope to get there. But the real action in strategy is, as Saul Alinsky put it, in the reaction to it – by other actors, by the opposition, and in consequential events. What makes it "strategy" and not "reaction" is that we make mindful choices of where we want to go and how we hope to get there like the potter interacting with the clay on the wheel.

Although strategic action is taken with reference to the future, it is taken in the present. We make choices in the present with an eye to the consequences these choices may have in the future. When we strategize, we give a voice to the future in the present. We make future claims on the present. When we don't strategize, it is often not because we don't know how, but because it can be very difficult. When we must make choices about how to invest scarce resources, voices of our present constituencies speak most loudly, even though they were created by choices in the past. The voices of future constituencies are silent. Strategy is a task of leadership in part because it requires real courage – a willingness to say no to current demands, while finding the faith to commit to an uncertain future. Our choices may turn out as we wish, but then again, they may not. Trying to shape the future may require choices that could involve substantial risk in the present. The first step in shaping the future, however, is to imagine it... and then to find the courage to act on our imagination.

Chart 3



Mapping the “arena” within which you hope to realize your goals first requires being as clear as you can about your goals. The more concrete, imaginable, and specific your goals, the more clearly you – and others whom you engage – can focus on pooling your efforts to achieve them. You make judgments about the constraints and opportunities within your “arena” of action. Surveying the resources of your constituency and those of other actors who may play a role in the unfolding action, including any potential opposition is another assessment that helps you understand your capacities. But resources are also not always obvious and good strategy often involves discovering resources in unexpected places. Strategic action is not a single event, but a process or a loop continuing throughout the life of a project (Chart 4). We plan, we act, we evaluate the results of our action, we plan some more, we act further, etc. We strategize as we implement, not prior to it. As Saul Alinsky writes, strategic action flows from the reactions of others to which one must respond creatively and adaptively. In other words, good strategizing is an ongoing adaptive process that effective leaders learn to do.

Chart 4



So strategy requires choosing – committing yourself and your resources to the course of action you believe most likely to yield the desired outcome, yet remaining ready to adapt to new opportunities as they emerge. A laundry list of “what we are going to try” is not a strategy. As Cesar Chavez used to say strategy is not so much about making the *right* decision as it is about making the decision that you made the right decision. In the same vein, Mitzberg writes, “Organizations that reassess their strategies continuously are like individuals who reassess their jobs or their marriages continuously – in

both cases, people will drive themselves crazy or else reduce themselves to inaction.” How do we know when we need to adapt, or when we need to “stay the course?” One of the primary responsibilities of strategic leadership is to manage this tension between commitment and adaptation.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

1. WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVATING VISION?

Usually we genuinely strategize only in response to a challenge so unique and so urgent that we realize we have to rethink the way we “always do things.” Most of the time we operate out of habit, organizational routines, the usual way of doing things. It is only when we are jolted out of habit that we pay real attention to the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves and, if we are emotionally prepared to do so, mindfully crafting a chosen response, a purposeful course of action. In the context of narrative, we describe this as a “story of now” moment: we are faced with an urgent challenge; we look for sources of hope that we can meet the challenge; and we commit to a course of action in that spirit of hope.

We need to come up with sources of hope, however, that address the question of why things are as bad as they are that they need change. While the vision of American democracy that Dr. King articulates in his Holt Street Baptist Church talk is a powerful one, it also evokes a source of hope for dealing with the problem at hand – the U.S. Supreme Court decision banning segregation in schools. It also evokes the very real power of faith in the community that he was leading. So a source of hope is not a picture of “flowers in May”, but, rather, a way of pointing toward a way out of the “nightmare” that Dr. King also describes.

2. WHAT IS YOUR “MEASURABLE OUTCOME”?

Strategy is a theory of how to turn what we have (*resources*) into what we need (*power*) to get what we want (*achieving outcomes*). It is a hypothesis about how we can use certain tactics to achieve specific outcomes. Deciding on a strategic objective upon which to focus – a clear, measurable, outcome to which you can commit – is the most important strategic choice you have to make. In making this choice it is wise to be guided by clearly criteria as to what makes for a “good goal”: e.g. inspired by your motivating vision; consistent with your theory of change; clear, measurable, observable; making creative use of your resources, enhancing your organizational capacity; a way to develop more leadership; etc, etc.

A key step in figuring out your measurable outcome is articulating your theory of change: your assumptions about how the world works, about how change can be brought about. Is the theory of change one of “information” – if we simply communicate the problem, others will change their behavior? Is it one of “awareness raising” – if we just let the public know how bad we think something is it will change? Or is it one of power – based on the assumption that things are the way that they are because some people want it that way and will not change unless they have to – unless it is in their economic, political, or moral interest to change than to stick with the status quo? Remember, power is nearly always dependent on the cooperation of the powerless. Disrupting that participation can get the attention of decision makers and shift the balance of power. Making your “theory of change” explicit can help you strategizing how to turn the “world as it is”, seen clearly, into the world as it “should be.”

POWER WITH

Sometimes we can create the change we need just by organizing our resources with others, creating power with them. For example, creating a cooperative day care, or a community credit union, or a volunteer service bank.



POWER OVER

Sometimes others hold power over decisions or resources that we need in order to create change in our lives. In that case we have to organize our own power with others first in order to make a claim on the resources or decisions that will fulfill our interests.



In reflecting on your “measurable outcome,” what is the underlying “theory of change”? Awareness, information, or power? How can we create the kind of power we need? Can we turn interdependency into influence?

How did you answer the four questions below to track down the power? Who are you targeting? What reaction do you want from the opposition, from your base, and from people in the middle?

CHANGING POWER OVER

When we have to engage with those who have power over us in order to create change, we ask ourselves four basic questions.



The Strategy Question:

5. What's our theory of change? How could we organize our resources to give us enough leverage to get what we want?

Brainstorm as many possible goals as you can but then come back and find the courage to decide on one. Strategy is all about focus. As Cesar Chavez used to say, “it’s not so much making the right decision, as it is making the decision you make the right decision.”

3. WHAT RESOURCES DOES YOUR CONSTITUENCY HOLD? WHAT OTHER RESOURCES MIGHT THEY HAVE ACCESS TO?

Since strategy is turning what you have into what you need to get what you want, you have to take a close look at “what you have.” Organizers look not only to achieve a measurable outcome that helps address the problem at hand, but also to develop the power or capacity of their constituency in the course of doing so, as well as developing the leadership to do this. For your constituency to grow stronger you will need to build strategy based on the resources to which your constituency has access. Think creatively of the resources to which your constituency has access – time, relationships, consent, imagination, their own bodies, etc.

4. WHAT ARE YOUR TACTICS? FOR HOW LONG DO I USE THEM? WHEN DO THEY CHANGE?

Strategy is a verb: a creative, continuous stream of tactical adaptation. It is something we do, not a noun, something we have. As we work toward our goal we learn from our successes and failures how to adapt our tactics to become more and more effective over time. Tactics are the specific activities with which you implement strategy – targeted in specific ways and carried out at specific times. Here are a few hints about good tactics: consistent with your resources; build on your strength and your opposition's weakness; fall within the experience of your constituency, but outside the experience of your opposition; unify your constituency, but divide the opposition; consistent with your goals. Violent tactics in pursuit of peaceful goals are dissonant, as are goals of “empowering” people that rely on money. Good tactics are fun, motivational, and simple.

One important aspect of tactical decision making is targeting – figuring out precisely how to focus limited resources on doing what is likely to yield the greatest result. One critical choice is about what problem you want to turn into an “issue” around which to mobilize. California organizer, Mike Miller, distinguishes between a “topic,” such as education, a “problem,” such as a lousy school, and an “issue,” such as replacing this principal with another one. Topics become problems when they become real within people's experience. They become “issues” when a solution to the problem has been defined. The topic of racial discrimination becomes a problem when, “I have to get on the bus at the front, pay my fare, get off, get on again at the back and sit (or stand) in the back even when there are empty seats in the ‘white’ section.” A problem, in turn, becomes an issue when something very specific can be done about it by specific actors; e.g., telling the bus company to integrate the buses (a solution) or face a boycott. A good issue is achievable, yet significant. Another critical choice is about which decision-makers you will hold accountable for taking action on your issue.

Challenging the status quo requires making up for a lack of resources by devising resourceful tactics. For instance, the Montgomery bus boycott itself was a tactic in service of the larger strategic goal of desegregating the buses. The initial tactic was not a boycott at all, but a law suit. As the campaign unfolded new tactics came into play: a car pool, getting arrested, etc. As above, in choosing a strategic goal, be explicit about criteria you are using to choose good tactics.

4. WHAT IS YOUR TIMING?

Timing is about sequencing your activities in such a way to be able to take the initiative, retain it, build momentum, and take advantage of particular moments of opportunity. You are wise to use initial tactics that yield resources that give you more capacity to succeed at your next steps. This is what defines a “peak” – a moment when you’ve created a new capacity that enables you to employ new tactics. For example, most campaigns have to devote an initial chunk of time to recruiting enough volunteers to create the “critical mass” that will allow them to reach out to get supporters on a large enough scale. This is what builds momentum. Like a snowball, each success contributes resources, which makes the next success more achievable. Another timing concern is about when to “confront” the opposition – or, if yours is a collaborative campaign, when to face the most difficult challenge you face. Saul Alinsky also wrote that it was important never to seek a confrontation you cannot “win.” Patiently building the capacity you need to launch a credible challenge to the opposition may avoid the necessity of confrontation – if they become convinced of your power. You keep the initiative by never concluding one activity until it is clear how it will lead to the next one. You also keep the initiative by expecting that every action you take will produce a reaction to which you have already considered how to respond. A campaign is a way to structure time.

STRATEGY, SCOPE, AND SCALE

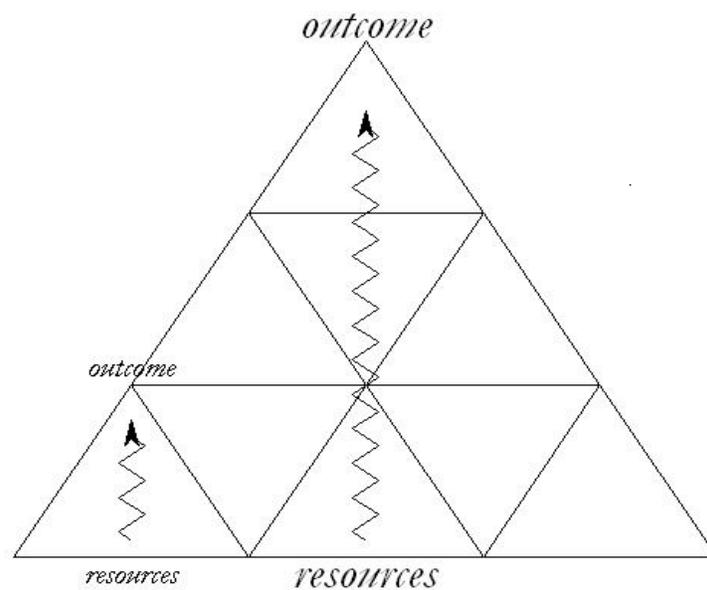
There is a fair amount of confusion about at what level of a project strategy plays a role. Do we focus on strategy when we are planning a year-long campaign, but only on tactics when planning our next general meeting? Do we focus on strategy when we are operating at a national level, but only on tactics at a local level? The answer is that strategy plays a role at every level of a project and in every stage. What differs is scope of the “outcome” the strategy is intended to achieve.

As Chart 5, Strategic Scope, is intended to illustrate, each level of a campaign requires projecting and outcome, assessing the resources available to achieve that outcome, assessing the relevant environmental factors, and devising a strategy (targeting, timing, tactics) to translate available

resources into that outcome. So your general meeting requires strategizing just as much as your year-long plan requires strategizing. It is likely different people will be responsible for different strategic scope at different levels of an organization or for different time periods, but good strategy is required at every level – and the more decentralized the organization, the more good strategists are required.

Finally, strategies developed in a well-designed campaign or organization are nested within one another; harmonize and reinforce one another; and do not operate in conflict with one another.

Chart 5



STRATEGIC CAPACITY

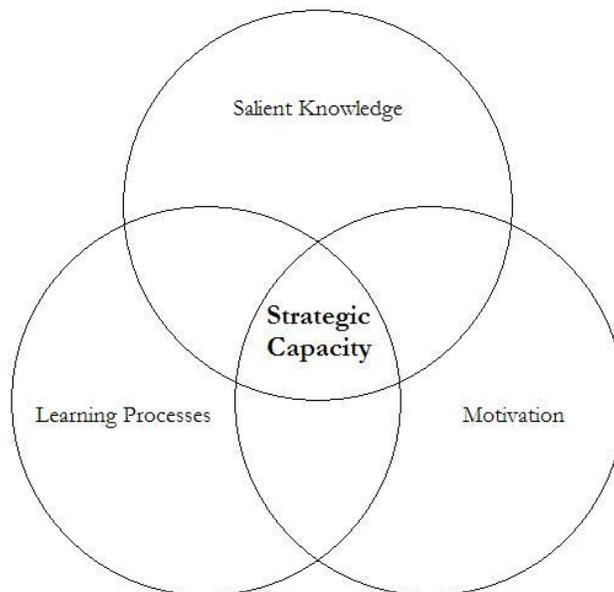
Devising good strategy is an ongoing creative process of learning how to achieve one's goals by adapting to constantly changing circumstances. It is the result of inputs from people with diverse experience – people who have learned the "salient knowledge," the "nitty-gritty" detail of the situations being strategized, but who have also learned that there is more than one way to look at things. It takes people who have learned what there is to know about the trees, but can also picture the whole forest. It takes people whose life experience, networks, and understanding link them to the diversity of constituencies whose mobilization matters to the success of the enterprise.

Strategy is most dynamic when the group responsible for strategy brings diverse experience, background and resources to the table. A key element in developing good strategy is use of

deliberative processes that facilitate learning by hearing different points of view, encouraging dissent, resolving things through negotiation rather than fiat or consensus, etc. Who is responsible for strategizing in your area? How can you increase the diversity (the capacity) of this group to strategize creatively? Does the strategy team deliberate well? (*Is there clear space created for open, creative brainstorming as part of the strategy process, before decisions are made?*) Can the strategy team move quickly? (*Is there a norm for making decisions in a way that includes everyone and also responds to the urgency of time?*)

Finally, the more motivated a leadership team, the more likely they are to come up with creative strategy. Factors encouraging motivation include viewing the work as a “vocation” or calling, participating in the decision making, enjoying the opportunity for some autonomy in acting on the decisions, etc. Although good strategy can be the fruit of a strategic genius, it is more often the result of a good strategic team that a good leader has put together.

Chart 6



STORY AND STRATEGY

There is tension inherent in the fact that our experience shapes what we think, but what we think shapes our experience. Are we wiser trying to alter our experience or how we think about our experience? Is it more effective to make new experience accessible in terms of people’s existing frames (frame alignment) or to change people’s frames to reinterpret their experience (frame transformation)? What is the link between “reinterpreting” the world and “changing” the world?

Organizing is not only about changing the world, nor is it only about changing what people think about the world – it is about the connection between the two. Organizers argue taking people on a weeklong “reframing” retreat will change very little if they return to the same “structural” setting they left behind. On the other hand, organizers also argue that changing a “structural” setting without changing the people who operate within that setting, will also change very little. Insofar as people change, they may begin to acquire the power to change their circumstances – and as people acquire the power to change their circumstances, they begin to change.

On the one hand, organizers challenge people to interpret their experience differently. This is the value of the “outsider’s” perspective. Organizers don’t just provide “information” but challenge people to reframe their understanding of themselves and their experience through relationships, new stories (frame transformation), deliberative processes, and action tactics. On the other hand, organizers must also make the world accessible in terms of the frames people have (frame amplification, frame bridging, frame extension). This is the value of the “insider’s” perspective. Outsiders don’t “frame” things as insiders do. This is why “reframing” is based not on one party doing a “snow job” on the other, but on a dialogic process between and among them. The work of turning “problems” into “issues” (reframing a problem as actionable) lies between the two. Much of the interpretive work of organizing involves finding ways to put new wine into old bottles. If people find they like it, they may decide to rebottle it.

Although story telling is primarily motivational and strategy is primarily analytic, a “credible strategy” plays an important part in a hopeful narrative. Devising a credible strategy and telling a motivational story go together. Most effective campaigns have a complementary “story” and “plan.” How we can build from resources we have, how we can take advantage of opportunities, why the constraints will not overwhelm us, how each step leads to the next - all of these are elements in a plausible strategy. Just as good strategy gives individual tactics meaning by transforming them from isolated events into steps on the road to our goal, a good story gives our actions meaning by transforming us into participants in a powerful narrative. Analytics can also help us “deconstruct” an old story, on the way to learning to tell a new one. In organizing, our strategy and story are not only how we persuade ourselves that a particular course of action is worth the risk but also how we mobilize others without whose participation there would be no action at all.

STRATEGIZING QUESTIONS

1. What is your motivating vision?
 - What's the "nightmare" that demands change"?
 - Why are we living that "nightmare"? Who or what is responsible?
 - What sources of hope can we articulate showing it could be different?

2. What is your measurable outcome?
 - What outcomes can you imagine that could help turn your vision into reality?
 - What's your "theory of change" of how to achieve these outcomes?

3. To whom and what resources to which you have access?
 - What resources are held by your constituency?
 - To what other resources could they gain access?

4. What tactics will you use?
 - Do they help achieve our strategic goal? How?
 - Do they make creative use of constituency resources?
 - Do they create an opportunity to develop leadership?

5. What is your timeline as to when you will use them?
 - Which tactics will you make use of first? Why?
 - Which tactics build on which other tactics?
 - Which tactics will become campaign "peaks"?