

PRINCIPLE

FOLLOW THE LEAD OF THE MOST IMPACTED

It is both good ethics and good politics to take direction from, and provide appropriate support to, those who have the most at stake in your cause.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Joshua Kahn Russell

Josh Kahn Russell is an organizer and strategist serving movements for social justice and ecological balance. He has worked as an action coordinator, facilitator, and trainer with many groups including the Ruckus Society and 350.org, and has helped win campaigns against banks, oil companies, logging corporations, and coal barons.

“CULTIVATE HUMILITY AND TAKE DIRECTION AND LEADERSHIP FROM THOSE MOST AFFECTED BY AN ISSUE.”

We’re all familiar with liberal do-gooder arrogance — the kind that stems from having the luxury of choosing from a salad bar of causes because none are immediately impacting their lives, or assuming that because you studied an issue in a university, you’re an expert. Avoid being that person: Cultivate humility and take direction and leadership from those most affected by an issue.

Because people on the receiving end of great injustices have to live with the consequences of campaigns that seek to address those injustices, they have the most to gain from victory — and the most to lose if something goes wrong. They’re also the best equipped to know, and to articulate, workable solutions to their problems. A campaign that ignores or minimizes their knowledge and voices could easily do more harm than good.

Accepting guidance from another isn’t always easy for people who already think of themselves as leaders. Self-identified “leaders” sometimes rush in too quickly, confident they’ve got the answer while their preconceptions and prejudices blind them to the organic answers all around them. We can mitigate these blind spots by being intentional about respecting the process and cultivating *accountability*.

Accountability can be a scary concept for activists, but it’s best to think of it as a proactive process that we walk together, rather than a standard that is either achieved or not.

The booklet *Organizing Cools the Planet* outlines four basic

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Bring Back Our Girls
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- Every Heartbeat Counts
- Hacking Apartheid
- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
- Modern-Day Slavery Museum
- No vote, no sex
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Public Art Nanny Hotline
- Round Dance Revolution
- Stop Praver Plan
- Taco Bell Boycott
- Trail of Dreams
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- Zapatista Caravan

Tactics

- Blockade
- Consumer boycott
- Debt strike

principles for cultivating accountability:

Transparency means being clear about your politics, organizational structure, goals, desires, and weaknesses. The point here is to be as open as possible about your perspectives and motivations.

Participation is about actively and equitably engaging with folks about the decisions that affect them.

Reflection and deliberation means that we actively open up conversation to re-evaluate where we're headed. It happens after participation, but once it's begun, it is a continuous thread that is woven throughout the experience.

Response is the ability to make amendments and adjustments to issues raised by *reflection and deliberation*.

However, accountability is not our goal; collaboration is our goal. Accountability is the pathway we walk. The cycle above moves us toward increasingly successful collaborations. Don't be discouraged if collaboration is difficult at first. Trust takes time. Be forgiving of yourself and others; we all make mistakes (see: THEORY: Anti-oppression).

The Ruckus Society's experience with this principle is instructive. Ruckus is a North America-based network of direct action trainers and coordinators. After years of grappling with the problematic dynamic of "parachuters" coming into people's communities from the outside, Ruckus developed a protocol where they prioritize long-term relationship building and only go where they're asked. Their "Ruckus Action Framework" is a great reference tool to use when building a similar protocol within your group.

Following the lead of the most impacted is a great opportunity to learn from and support impacted groups in their struggles. It can be one of the most profound and rewarding experiences of activism.

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

LEARN MORE

Native Leadership

Yes! Magazine

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/native-leadership>

Organizing Cools the Planet

Hilary Moore and Joshua Kahn Russell, 2011

<https://organizingcoolstheplanet.wordpress.com>

Ruckus Action Framework

The Ruckus Society

<http://ruckus.org/action-framework/>

- Eviction blockade
- General strike
- Jail solidarity
- Legislative theatre
- Subversive travel
- Trek

Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Beware the tyranny of structurelessness
- Build people power, then negotiate
- Challenge patriarchy as you organize
- Consensus is a means, not an end
- Consider your audience
- Develop an inside-outside strategy
- Don't mistake your group for society
- Focus on basic needs
- Give voice to those that can't speak
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Praxis makes perfect
- Solidarity, not aid
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Use your cultural assets
- We are all leaders
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Abolition
- Anti-oppression
- Comunalidad (communality)
- Debt revolt
- Decolonization
- Direct action
- Environmental justice
- Gerontocracy
- Neoliberalism
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- Postcolonialism
- Poverty
- Revolutionary nonviolence

Bridge Conversations: People Who Live and Work in Multiple Worlds

Arts and Democracy Project, edited by Caron Atlas, 2011

https://books.google.com/books/about/Bridge_Conversations.html?id=aTQOMwEACAAJ

Taking Responsibility, Taking Direction: White Anti-Racism in Canada

Sheila Wilmot, 2006

https://books.google.com/books/about/Taking_Responsibility_Taking_Direction.html?id=gNERAQAIAAJ

- The Global South
- The NGO-ization of resistance
- The tactics of everyday life
- Theatre of the Oppressed

Methodologies

- Art of Hosting
- Battle of the story
- Hardship to grievance
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Colonialism, Movement building