

# PRINCIPLE

## LEAD WITH SYMPATHETIC CHARACTERS

Good actions tell a good story. Good stories revolve around sympathetic characters. The most sympathetic characters are members of the impacted community that outsiders can easily relate to.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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## “AN AUDIENCE WILL CARE MUCH MORE ABOUT INJUSTICE IF THEY CAN RELATE TO THE PEOPLE AFFECTED.”

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Assembling a compelling cast of characters is a critical strategic consideration for any action designer. Actions tend to be strong on identifying and vilifying the antagonists of the narrative, but an audience will care much more about injustice if they can relate to the people affected. Successful actions are often those that present strong protagonists and other sympathetic characters.

The role of the messenger who delivers the story of an action is key. Messengers embody the message by putting a human face on conflict and placing the action within a larger context. Those most impacted by the issue tend to make for more sympathetic and compelling messengers. For instance, if the action is about farm workers, it can be more effective to amplify the voices of a small group of farm workers who are taking action than to have a larger group of non-farm workers to speak up on their behalf. (Of course, solidarity actions certainly have their place: see Taco Bell Boycott.)

Power holders understand the importance of deploying sympathetic characters. For instance, welfare cuts get presented as benefiting working mothers, and corporate tax cuts are sold as job-creation tools to help the unemployed. Time and again, the powerful play one group of sympathetic characters off against another, or argue with Orwellian duplicity that the victims of a policy will actually benefit from it.

In these cases, a campaign becomes a contest over who gets to speak for those suffering. With whom do we sympathize, and are

### POTENTIAL RISKS

The dynamics of who gets to speak, how the speakers are portrayed, and who is cast as the heroes, victims, and villains are deeply entwined in questions of power and privilege. Activists should take care not to play into disempowering narratives of victimization that plague marginalized communities. Navigating these dynamics skillfully and authentically is essential to successful actions and campaigns.

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- Birthright
- Unplugged/Replugged
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Citizens' Posse
- Conflict Kitchen

those characters actually given space to speak for themselves? A showdown results between messengers jockeying to represent themselves as the authentic representatives of the impacted constituencies.

In recent years, we have seen several uprisings against repressive governments framed explicitly around sympathetic characters. In Myanmar, monks became the new face of the pro-democracy movement, replacing the students of the 1988 mobilizations as the primary messengers. Obviously, many factions of society supported the movement, but with the monks at the front of the marches it was clear that the pro-democracy movement spoke for the conscience of the nation. Similarly, in Pakistan lawyers became the face of the fight against government impunity. Who better to embody the message of a need to respect the rule of law than lawyers?

It's important to ensure that the faces of the action are not just representative of the relevant impacted community, but also are easily recognizable to outsiders as key characters in the story. This can come down to the crude but important dynamics of costuming: A single religious leader wearing religious sacraments will communicate that people of faith are involved in the action better than twenty religious leaders wearing jeans and sweatshirts (see: PRINCIPLE: Don't dress like a protester).

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## LEARN MORE

Tools and Resources

Center for Story-Based Strategy

<https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-resources#intro-to-sbs-link>

- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Modern-Day Slavery Museum
- No vote, no sex
- Santa Claus Army
- Stolen Beauty
- Streets Into Gardens
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- Trail of Dreams
- Whose Tea Party?
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- Zapatista Caravan

## Tactics

- Artistic vigil
- Civil disobedience
- Eviction blockade
- Forum theatre
- Gherao (encirclement)
- Hunger strike
- Identity correction
- Invisible theatre
- Lamentation
- Media-jacking
- Storytelling

## Principles

- Bring the issue home
- Consider your audience
- Do the media's work for them
- Don't dress like a protester
- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- Give voice to those that can't speak
- Kill them with kindness
- Know your cultural terrain
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Recapture the flag
- Reframe the issue
- Show, don't tell
- Stay on message
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Think narratively
- Use others' prejudices against them

## Theories

- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Floating signifier
- Framing
- Prefigurative politics
- The social cure

### **Methodologies**

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Story of self, us, and now

### **TAGS**

Action design, Communications