

# PRINCIPLE

## ESCALATE STRATEGICALLY

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### CONTRIBUTED BY

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## "EACH NEW ACTION RE-EMPHASIZES THE LARGER DEMAND AND BUILDS YOUR STRENGTH TO TAKE THE NEXT ESCALATED STEP."

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"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."  
—Chinese Proverb

When authorities ignore the demands of the people, people can pressure them to listen and act. But to win, people must keep up the pressure. A target rarely gives in after one action, so it is often necessary to strategically increase the pressure on them in a step-by-step escalation that draws upon a diverse mix of tactics (see: PRINCIPLE: Choose tactics that support your strategy). The target will try to wait each pressure tactic out, but a well-organized campaign will then up the pressure in a new way. Each new action re-emphasizes the larger demand, builds strength to take the next escalated step, and reminds the target that the people are not going to leave them alone until they give in.

The 2017 Make Bushenyi Great Again (MBUGA) campaign in Western Uganda offers one great example of a campaign that used stage-by-stage strategic escalation to win their demands. Their target: the elected District Chairperson. Their demand: Institute a service commission (an office that handles government worker-related issues) for Bushenyi District.

First, they presented their grievances to the elected chairperson through a **table dialogue**; he promised they were working on it. One month later, nothing changed, so they opted to **file a lawsuit** against the local government. The Chairperson laughed at it and mocked the citizens for wasting their time and money. For the next five months, the case went back and forth; at every hearing it was postponed.

### POTENTIAL RISKS

It requires a lot of patience and strategic focus to keep your team together. When you are less strategic you can lose people's support. Participants need to understand why each additional step is needed, and at what level or time it will be useful so they are willing to take that additional risk with you.

If your campaign does not escalate fast enough, it is likely to become boring and reduce the morale of those who stand for your cause. If your campaign escalates too fast, you might take on well-equipped opponents that are prepared to delegitimize your position or discredit you for lack of public support.

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

Local citizens became angry, and escalated the pressure. First, they chose a **march and demonstration** to capture the attention of higher-up leaders who could pressure the court to take the case. And then, a month later, they instituted a **direct action** that shut down the District Headquarters. Citizens left behind placards demanding a service commission. MBUGA also told the judiciary that unless there was action, when they came back, they would **shut down** the court house, too.

Seeing the determination of the people, and worried about an escalating scandal, the judiciary acted quickly. The case was heard in court in July, 2017 and citizens won the case. Victory!

The MBUGA campaign escalated from dialogue to legal action to street protest to a building take-over to a credible threat to come back and shut it all down. The campaign escalated not just the militancy of the tactic, but also the scale and number of participants in the action. And, wisely, organizers only escalated once the majority of participants realized it was necessary and were on board to take the next step.

Specific escalation steps may vary from campaign to campaign. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers won higher wages for farmworkers in Florida by very strategically escalating from **grassroots organizing**, to **community-wide work stoppages** against local growers, to **hunger strikes**, and eventually to a **nationwide boycott** against a global brand.

Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement in Kenya escalated through a strategic series of steps from planting trees all the way to catalyzing a resistance that forced a dictator out of office:

- 1) Planting trees with rural women.
- 2) Placing political meaning on these trees.
- 3) Writing letters against the privatization of public parks and forests.
- 4) Going on hunger strike.
- 5) Occupying the parks to prevent their closure.
- 6) Stripping naked to demand release of political prisoners.
- 7) Mass actions to end Moi dictatorship.

Whatever the specific steps, the principle is the same, and summed up nicely by Saul Alinsky in *Rules for Radicals*: "Keep the pressure on. Never let up." Creativity and agility are key here. As Alinsky says: "Keep trying new things to keep the opposition off balance. As the opposition masters one approach, hit them from the flank with something new. A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. Don't become old news."

- 99% Bat Signal
- Battle in Seattle
- Bidder 70 (Tim DeChristopher)
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Dump Veolia Campaign
- Earth First!
- Justice for Janitors
- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
- Santa Claus Army
- Schools of Struggle
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Stolen Gas Campaign
- Streets Into Gardens
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- #YouStink

### Tactics

- Blockade
- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Citizen's arrest
- Creative petition delivery
- Debt strike
- Divestment
- Eviction blockade
- General strike
- Hunger strike
- Mass street action
- Occupation

### Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Build people power, then negotiate
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Choose your target wisely
- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Don't fall in love with your tactics
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Pick battles big enough to matter, small enough to win
- Praxis makes perfect
- Put your target in a decision dilemma

## LEARN MORE

Rules for Radicals

Open Culture

<http://www.openculture.com/2017/02/13-rules-for-radicals.html>

When Not to March

Waging Nonviolence, 2014

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/march-rally/>

Taking Root

Green Belt Movement & Marlboro Productions, 2015

<https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/node/766>

- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Simple rules can have grand results
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

## Theories

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Cultural hegemony
- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Hamoq and hamas
- Neoliberalism
- New Pan-Afrikanism
- Palace coup
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Political identity paradox
- Revolutionary nonviolence
- Revolutionary reform
- Strategic nonviolence

## Methodologies

- Pillars of power
- Points of intervention
- Power mapping
- SMART objectives
- Spectrum of allies
- The Movement Cycle
- Theory of change

## TAGS

Campaign strategy, Corruption, Direct action, Movement building