

PRINCIPLE

PUT YOUR TARGET IN A DECISION DILEMMA

Design your action so that your target is forced to make a decision, and all their available options play to your advantage.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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If you design your action well, you can force your target into a situation where they have no good options: where they're "damned if they do, and damned if they don't." This is known as a decision dilemma.

Gandhi's 1930 (see: STORY: The Salt March) presented the British authorities with a classic decision dilemma: either beat up and arrest Gandhi and his supporters and turn them into martyrs for the movement, or let them march to the sea in open defiance of British authority and the hated Salt Act.

Many actions with concrete goals (such as a blockade or a sit-in) require a decision dilemma in order to be successful. A sit-in at a corporate HQ, for instance, should leave your target with only two options, if they are not willing to meet your demands: 1) evict your forcibly and face the negative public attention this would cause, or 2) wait you out, allowing you to gather more attention and support while business as usual grinds to a halt.

When done skillfully, decision dilemmas can help win major concessions from powerful targets.

LEARN MORE

Put your target in a decision dilemma
Andrew Boyd & Joshua Kahn Russell, Beautiful Trouble, 2012
<http://beautifultrouble.org/principle/put-your-target-in-a-decision-dilemma/>

The Dilemma Demonstration: Using nonviolent civil disobedience to put the government between a rock and a hard place
Philippe Duhamel, New Tactics in Human Rights

POTENTIAL RISKS

In a repressive environment, or against a powerful target, you need to be sure that your action *actually* puts them in a decision dilemma, or you may just put yourself at serious risk. If a powerful target would face no negative repercussions for attacking you, then there is no decision dilemma keeping them from doing so. In such a case, either use a less direct method, or find a way to change the context (get celebrity or international supporters to accompany you, have major media witnessing, etc.), so that your target *would* pay a big price for responding violently.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Brazil's Free Fare Movement
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Countering Homophobic Policing
- Daycare Centre Sit-In

<https://www.newtactics.org/sites/default/files/resources/Dilemma-Demonstration-EN.pdf>

Pranksters vs. Autocrats: Why Dilemma Actions Advance Nonviolent Activism

Penn State McCourtney Institute for Democracy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izdN2OPKSCo>

- Disrupting Obama's town hall in Myanmar
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- #GambiaHasDecided
- Gezi Park iftar
- Maraiwatsede: the land belongs to the Xavante
- Québec Student Strike
- Reclaim the Streets
- Santa Claus Army
- Schools of Struggle
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- The Salt March
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation

Tactics

- Blockade
- Citizen's arrest
- Civil disobedience
- Creative disruption
- Creative petition delivery
- Debt strike
- Distributed denial of service (DDoS)
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Eviction blockade
- Hunger strike
- Identity correction
- Inflatables
- Mass street action
- Media-jacking
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Occupation
- Subversive travel

Principles

- Activate international mechanisms
- Build people power, then negotiate
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Choose your target wisely
- Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Escalate strategically

- Focus on basic needs
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Kill them with kindness
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Personalize and polarize
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Take risks, but take care
- The real action is your target's reaction
- The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself
- Turn the tables
- Use the law, don't be afraid of it

Theories

- Action logic
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Hamoq and hamas
- Palace coup
- Strategic nonviolence

Methodologies

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Peel the onion
- Pillars of power
- Points of intervention
- Power mapping
- SMART objectives

TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Direct action, Nonviolence, State violence, Street protest