

Direct Action Organizing

There are different methods of organizing or ways of making social change, and all have their uses. Midwest Academy uses and teaches the "Direct Action Organizing" concept. Direct Action Organizing is based on the power of people to take collective action on their own behalf. The point is not that one approach is better than the others. In fact, often many kinds of organizing are needed, but the Midwest Academy focuses on Direct Action Organizing.

Method	Examples
Direct Service	Affordable housing development. Insulating or weatherizing homes. Shelter. Soup Kitchen.
Education	Issue research. Teach people how to look for an apartment. Cultural events.
Self-Help	Neighborhood clean-up day. Baby sitting co-op.
Advocacy	Propose laws or regulations on behalf of people who don't necessarily know that it is being done.
Direct Action	The people who have the problem take action to solve it. Make the city clean up the street or provide child care.

Here is an example of the differences:

Suppose an organizer encountered a situation in which there were a large number of homeless people in the community.

- If the organizer went out and started convincing neighborhood religious institutions to put cots in their basements for the homeless, that would be a **service** approach. The organizer and the congregations would be doing a direct service for people.
- If the organizer started doing studies about the causes of homelessness and how it was dealt with in other cities, and then distributed the information, that is an **education** approach. There are many groups that exist mainly to educate people about some social issue.
- If the organizer began to hold workshops for homeless people about how to find a house or a job, that would be a **self-help** approach. The idea is that people can solve their problem by improving themselves or their knowledge of themselves, and that they can often do it better in groups.
- If the organizer went down to City Hall to lobby to get the city to open shelters and food programs, that would be an **advocacy** approach. The people without homes would not necessarily be involved or even know that the organizer was doing it.
- If the organizer started talking to homeless people and organized a large number of them to first decide on the solutions that they wanted, and then

to pressure the city to win those solutions, that would be a **direct action** approach. The people directly affected by the problem, what ever it is, take action to win a solution.

There Are Three Fundamental Principles Of Direct Action:

1. Win concrete improvements in people's lives.
2. Make people aware of their own power (by winning victories).
3. Alter the relations of power between people, the government, and other institutions by building strong permanent local, state and national organizations.

We all have ideas about how society could be better in the future, but when we say "win improvements", we mean today, here and now concrete improvements, like wining smaller class size in schools, getting doctors to accept Medicare assignment as payment in full, forcing the city to build affordable housing, or requiring utilities to produce energy from such renewable sources as wind and sun.

When we say that we want to give people "a sense of their own power", we mean that people themselves are involved in winning the issue. If an advocate goes out and speaks for you, or if a lawyer sues for you, you get a sense of the power of the advocate or the lawyer, but not of your own power. Direct Action Organizing brings people directly into the situation in large numbers so that they know that they won. Why does it matter? Because people who develop a sense of their organized power are more likely to stay active and take on larger issues.

When we say that we want to "alter the relations of power", we mean building organizations that those in power, at all levels of government, will always have to worry about. Whenever they decide to do anything that has an impact on your group, they are going to have to say "wait a minute", how will that organization react to this? We also know from sad experience that what is won this year can be taken away next year if the organization that won it disappears or is weakened. In Direct Action Organizing, building an organization is always as important as winning a particular issue.

The Six Steps of Direct Action Organizing

When we engage in Direct Action Organizing, we organize a campaign to win a specific issue, that is, a specific solution to a problem. We have observed that an issue campaign usually goes through this series of stages.

A. People identify a problem

The people who have the problem agree on a solution and how to get it. They may define the issue narrowly: "Make our landlord return our rent deposits when we move out." Or, they may define it more broadly: "Make the city council pass a law requiring the return of rent deposits."

If the landlord owns only the one building, the tenants may be able to win on their own, but if the landlord owns many buildings around the city, then

building a coalition to pass a law might be the best way.

B. The organization turns the problem into an issue.

There is a difference between a problem and an issue. An issue is a specific solution to a problem that you choose to work on. You don't always get to choose your problems. Often your problems choose you. But you always choose your issues, the solution to the problem that you wish to win. Air pollution is a problem. Changing the law to get older power plants covered by the same air quality regulations that apply to newer plants is an issue.

C. Develop strategy.

A strategy is the overall plan for a campaign. It is about power relationships and it involves asking six questions:

1. What are your long and short term goals?
2. What are your organizational strengths and weaknesses?
3. Who cares about this problem?
4. Who are your allies?
5. Who has the power to give you what we want?
6. What tactics can you use to apply your power and make it felt by those who can give you what you want?

D. Bring many people to face the decision-maker.

Use large meetings and actions to force the person who can give you what you want to react. That person is the decision-maker. The decision-maker is often referred to as the "target" of the campaign. **The decision-maker is always an individual person or number of individuals**, never a board or elected body as a whole. Decision making bodies must be personalized. So, if you are trying to get something passed by the City Council, for example, you don't say the decision-maker is the City Council. Rather you need specific members of the council to vote on our issue. Who are they? Name them. What is your power over them? Do you have members in their districts?

E. The decision-maker reacts to you.

You either get what you want or you have to go out and organize still larger numbers of people for a second round of the fight. Sometimes it takes several rounds before the fight is won. That is why we think of organizing as a whole campaign, not just as a series of one shot events.

F. Win, regroup, and go on to next campaign.

This is a quick summary of what you will learn at the Midwest Academy five day

workshop. Each session will go deeper into one of these points through a combination of exercises, role plays and presentations.