The **Ruckus Society**

Action Planning Training Manual

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The Ruckus Action Planning Manual

Introduction:
Three arguments for direct action

Nonviolent direct action is often misunderstood and just as often criticized. You hear it called ineffective, un-American, or illegal. That the effectiveness of direct action can still be debated strains credulity. The success of Gandhi's campaigns in India or the U.S. Civil Rights Movement should have settled the question. Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement, the campaigns against nuclear power, to save ancient forests, to achieve a global ban on high-seas drift net fishing and end ocean dumping all have incorporated significant direct action components. The American experience is teeming with nonviolent direct action. One of the most famous direct actions ever, the Boston Tea Party, is patriotically taught in school. These colonial campaigns were so effective that some argue the "shot heard 'round the world" actually delayed American independence. Most of the world's democracies have been created by acts of conscience against the state. The final argument - that direct action is illegal - is weakest. It is also illegal to break into a home. But if that home is on fire and you fear someone will be hurt, it is OK - it is in fact your responsibility - to break in. This is the argument of competing harms: A smaller harm is accepted if it prevents a greater harm from occurring.

The Functions of Direct Action

As we discuss the uses of direct action, remember one thing: almost all successful actions occur within the context of an ongoing campaign. This means that political - not only logistical - work has been done before the action. This improves the chances that your action will be understood and successful. This also means you intend to follow up on your action. Intervention demands responsibility. Here are some typical functions of direct action within campaigns:

- **ANNOUNCEMENT OR ALARM**

  You have learned of a situation that demands immediate attention from the public. Your direct action is meant to shine a light on a hidden (more likely, covered-up) danger that must not be kept secret.

- **REINFORCEMENT**

  You have been campaigning on an issue, yet somehow the issue remains murky to the public. You take action to clearly define the evil or injustice, and the parties responsible.

- **PUNCTUATION**

  Direct action can be used to sustain interest in a campaign. It is a dramatic reminder that the problem has not gone away. Direct action can serve as a milepost - the early anti- nuclear movement marked time by Seabrook occupations - or it may commemorate an outrage that should not be forgotten, such as the fifth anniversary of the Exxon Valdez spill, or ten years since Chernobyl.

- **ESCALATION**

  A frequent use of direct action is to raise the stakes in an ongoing struggle. If a group of activists who have not previously used direct action turns to it, this sends a message that the situation has become critical and direct action is the last remaining avenue of protest.

- **MORALE**

  Sometimes when a group has suffered a setback and morale is low - or a group is tired from a long struggle - direct action can serve to raise the spirits and renew the struggle.

  There is no doubt that direct action is a powerful builder of morale and community, but a word of caution. Those of us who have engaged in direct action know its transforming effect. It leads to new discoveries about yourself, changes and intensifies your relationship with your fellow activists, and alters profoundly your notions of power. It is intoxicating. But these personal-growth benefits are not the reason for doing direct action. Your actions should strive to make an objective change in the world - to literally change the course of history. The change you seek is the main course of the action; empowerment, self-awareness and community are dessert.

The Symbolic Nature of Direct Action

There is much debate over "hard" vs. "soft" action. You hear it at meetings, around campfires, or read it in an eco-journal: folks advocating "harder" action and often criticizing "soft" action as being "just symbolic." This argument has at times even kept groups on different sides of the divide from working together effectively. But this argument shows a misunderstanding: all direct action is symbolic by nature.
When people say "hard" actions, they usually mean physical intervention or blocking. It is thought that hard actions cost the object of the action "a real price" and often end in arrests.

"Soft" action, on the other hand, is viewed as mostly symbolic - sometimes so non-interventional that it is described simply as a presence or witness. Demonstrations and vigils also tend to wear the soft label. But when facts are examined, distinctions blur. Blockades always end; plugs come out; bladders give out. So is there a difference? You can argue that the difference remains in the risk entailed by the action, or its difficulty. This is, in the end, a red herring. All actions, "hard" or "soft," have the same goal: to make an objective change in the world.

First, activists use direct action to reduce the issues to symbols. These symbols must be carefully chosen for their utility in illustrating a conflict: an oil company vs. an indigenous community, a government policy vs. the public interest.

Then we work to place these symbols in the public eye, in order to identify the evildoer, detail the wrongdoing and, if possible, point to a more responsible option. Frequently, usually by design, the symbolism and conflict are communicated to the wider public, using the media. This symbolic treatment of the issue is, in fact, at the core of action strategy, and knowing this is key to understanding the tactic. When someone criticizes your idea for a direct action as "just symbolic," remind him or her that all are. Ultimately the debate over "hard" vs. "soft" action is only a distraction from the real question: could this action make an objective change in the world?

The most important, and therefore most difficult, thing about direct action is developing a sense of timing - when to seize a political moment.

The second most important thing is creativity in designing an action, and fortunately that's a bit easier. Most of us are already creative in other areas, and this generally transfers well to direct action - especially when you've got a group of committed, focused activists with which to work and trade ideas.

There are a number of ways to practice creative brainstorming. Find out which one works for your group of activists. The most crucial factor in brainstorming, of course, is openness to new ideas from all quarters - action leaders must be ready to accept an idea that may come from a team member who has a "minor" role, or is not as experienced in actions.

A close second is a commitment to stay at it until you get it right - hours, days or longer. Brainstorm until you're dry, then analyze what you've come up with and wait for your creative well to fill again. Remember that formal indoor meetings are often the hardest place to be creative. Vary the location for your strategy sessions. David Brower's advice is to close more bars. You'll get your best ideas between midnight and closing time. Openness to new ideas also includes the ability to see good ideas in other quarters, and appropriate them. You can't copyright an action, so don't be afraid to steal good ideas.

Become a student of the ways other groups or individuals are taking action. Pay special attention to direct actions by non-environmental groups, who are doing some of the most creative stuff today. ACT-UP, Queer Nation, the students at Gallaudet University, homeless activists, even Operation Rescue and the Wise Use movement, on the other side of the ideological spectrum, have added to the tactical development of direct action in recent years. Look for and at action as a tactic instead of specific issues.

Finally, remember timing once again. A colleague used to say: "Timing may not be everything, but it's damn close." Action skills such as climbing or inflatable driving are mechanical ones and people usually pick them up relatively quickly. A sense of timing and opportunity is harder to develop. When examining other actions as a source of ideas, always work to understand the timing behind them.

Action Development

Although each action is different and in its course takes on a life of its own, there are a series of more-or-less standard steps to develop one. These steps presume that you are developing your action within the context of an ongoing campaign:

1. Issue Identification and Clarification
2. Picking the Audience
3. Setting the Context
4. Scouting
5. Performing the action

Issue Identification and Clarification

The public has a brief, shifting attention span and a limited ability to absorb new information. That is why you as an activist must keep your campaign and action focused and on message. You must be able to answer three questions: Presuming your overall campaign goals are clear, ask yourself again: Why is an action warranted at this particular point? Does the proposed action have a reasonable chance of benefiting the campaign - of sending a message, moving the debate or raising its profile? What about the political follow-up to the action: Will you be able to exploit the political opportunity your action seeks to create? As environmentalists, we recognize that everything is connected. But we can't attempt to campaign on everything at once, because the public won't hear us. You must define the issues as clearly and simply as possible. For instance, your campaign might be against the Forest Service in general. But what are you going to focus on right now? Clearcutting, endangered species, habitat and clean water are all good issues, but you can't make a coherent statement about all of them in one action. So decide which aspect of your campaign you're going to emphasize right now. Then work to make everything about the action - location, banner slogan, even what your activists are

wearing - speak to that. A word about anger: A lot of us have been fighting the Forest Service, or nukes, or whatever, for a long time, and sometimes we build up a fair bit of righteous anger. A little anger can be a good thing. It puts a passion in the work. But seek in your action to go beyond expressing your anger. Let them - and the public - know why you're angry. People sometimes get impatient with this arduous process of issue clarification and message development. But it is an absolute prerequisite to the next steps. Only with a clear understanding of your campaign and the issue can you pick the target audience, set the context, and scout, plan and execute your direct action.

Picking the Target Audience

Picking the target audience is the next step in your action's development. It flows directly from your understanding of what needs to happen in the campaign at this point. In essence you're saying: "I want my target audience to do this: " Is it the general public, government officials, the mill operators, or the corporate executives you are trying to affect? Too often we hear a defiant comrade declare: "I'm sending a message to all of them." Good intentions, but fuzzy politics. Such universal messages are very rare. If you think you're sending a message to "all of them," it often means you haven't thought through your target audience well enough. Each action should reveal what we're against and what we're for. We may be against several things: the mill, the Forest Service, and the corporate suits. But each of these players should be held specifically accountable for their specific actions. Nailing them on the specifics - who did what, and when did they do it - may be harder than issuing a grand indictment, but sends a clearer message. The principle also applies when you're thinking about what segment of the public you're trying to reach.

Setting the Context

Before making decisions about the place of action or other tactical choices we should pause and ask ourselves: Will the action be understood? It's an important consideration. Actions don't occur in a void. They occur in a particular context, and being sensitive to the context increases the chances that your action will be understood. Do you want to do that hard-hitting action just before Christmas, for example, when folks don't like receiving bad news? As activists we often have a more sophisticated understanding of an issue than the general public. Polls have consistently shown that only about 15 percent of the American public is "interested and informed" on any given issue. This has several consequences for direct action campaigning. First, we have to avoid jargon - specialized language or concepts understood in an industry of a movement, but obscure to the general public. Second, if you want to campaign on these more complicated issues, you must take the time to establish the context before the action. There are many ways to do this. Releasing a report, holding a press conference or briefing, placing letters to the editor or advertising, can all help to establish context. Third and most important, it's much easier - that is, more understandable to the public - to protest events rather than policy. In the

IWC example cited above, an action directed at a possible policy shift would be very difficult to understand. An action directed at the Russians after they actually changed their vote would be much easier for the public to understand. Another example: You might want to send a message that the President's nuclear policy is an ongoing disaster for the planet. In trying to protest these policies keep your eye open for event opportunities - a presidential visit to a nuclear research site, an accident at a government nuclear facility, etc. Finally, for all actions, remember the KISS rule: Keep It Short and Simple. The public has only a limited capacity to absorb new information over the short term.

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Ruckus Action Planning Manual – Change History

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