

PLANNING AN ACTION

So you want to plan an action. There's a government official who needs to get zapped, a policy that needs changing, a company making huge profits on AIDS drugs, and important healthcare services that are not being provided -- AND IT'S TIME TO TAKE ACTION. Here are some ideas and suggestions to help you plan and focus your action.

First, ask yourself some very basic questions:

- (1) What is the **goal** of your action -- what do you want?;
- (2) Who is the **target** -- who is the action for or against?;
- (3) Who is your **audience** -- who do you want to reach or who will actually see your action;
- (4) What is your **message** -- what do you want to say?;
- and (5) What is your **tactic** -- how will you achieve your **goal**, hit your **target**, reach your **audience** and get your **message** across? The simpler your answers to these questions, the easier it will be for you to come up with your plan or **scenario**.

There are many types of actions. The most basic is the **moving picket**. This is a legal demonstration consisting of a group of people with fact sheets, posters, and other visuals walking and chanting in a circle in front of a specific site. The First Amendment guarantees you the right to free speech, and as long as you are on public property, keep the line moving and leave some room for pedestrians, you are not doing anything unlawful. Similarly, handing out flyers and fact sheets at the demo site or across the street (or in any public space) is also perfectly legal.

If you decide to move your picket from one site to another you have a **march**. Other popular variations on the **moving picket** include **sit-ins**, **kiss-ins** and the ever-popular (and very photogenic) **die-ins**. A **die-in** is when protesters lie down on the ground to represent the thousands who have died or are being killed by the policies and neglect of the government or your **target**. Often people chant ("How many more have to die," "we die, they do nothing," etc.). Sometimes protesters carry cardboard tombstones with names or slogans, creating an instant AIDS cemetery and othertimes the "dead" bodies are outlined in chalk and messages are written in.

Actions can be planned as large demonstrations or as smaller more focused **zaps**. Whereas larger demonstrations and pickets tend to be symbolic, the **zap** is often focused on a specific target or goal. **Zaps** can take any form from **pickets** to disruptions of speeches and meetings or simply

the distribution of information (safe sex info, condoms, flyers or fact sheets). A **zap** is also an excellent forum for **civil disobedience (CD)**. **Civil disobedience** is purposeful direct action risking arrest by disobeying the law. This can include everything from blocking traffic (often a component of larger picket actions) to a sit-in at some official's office.

Though all demonstrations should have a **support plan**, CD requires more sophisticated **support**. **Support** is the main link between the arrestees and the outside world. People planning to do **support** must be willing to track the arrestees through the entire arrest process and plan not to get arrested themselves. They observe the arrest of the demonstrators, noting who is arrested and whether unnecessary force is being used, and then follow them to wherever they are being held and wait at the site for all arrestees to be released. They coordinate with the lawyers and/or legal support and **support central** -- an off-site support designate who has a copy of the support information and access to a phone and emergency phone numbers. **Support** is best done in teams and under no circumstances should anyone go to a police precinct house or jail alone.

Members planning to get arrested should fill out a **support sheet** with their name, home phone, address, date of birth, emergency phone #'s and 24-hr needs (medicine) etc. This sheet is handed in to the designated support person and used for identification purposes. This list is kept internally and is not given over to the police. Everyone wishing to risk arrest (or even participate as **support**) are also encouraged to go through a **CD-training**, if possible. Of course, sometimes the police don't give you that option.

Whatever the action, you will probably need **fact sheets**, **chants** and **visuals**. **Fact sheets** are information sheets briefly outlining why you are protesting and what your demands are. **Chants** help get your information out to the public (and the media) in small memorable **soundbites** ("What do we want -- money for AIDS -- when do we want it -- Now!") and keep momentum going in the group.

Visuals are extremely important in getting your message across to the public and for the **media** they are essential. A picture is worth a thousand words, especially if your reporters are not terribly AIDS-literate. Visuals can include posters, banners (both carried or hung from sympathetic windows, rooftops or scaffoldings or when indoors, suspended aloft by helium balloons), red tape, handcuffs, bed sheets, clown masks, tote-boards or even people-driven visuals (die-ins, kiss-ins, costumes, etc.) Have fun, be creative -- just get your message out.

Another key component in planning an action is **logistics**, or the "where" and "when" of your action. Try to scout out the location of your action ahead of time, preferably at the same time of day as your action. This will give you a truer picture of traffic and security concerns and help you decide on the appropriate **scenario**. Pay special attention to the layout of the proposed space -- is it a good location for your action? Is it accessible, easy to get in or out of? Is it visible to pedestrian/auto traffic? Is there a place for a good "photo opportunity"? Is it on private or public property? If your action is indoors, make sure to check all of your possible routes of entry and exit. What is the building security situation? If you are making an "unscheduled appearance" at a hearing or function, do you need a pass/ticket or a costume (corporate/Republican drag) to get in? Also, when selecting a day and time for your action, remember that certain times (and days) are better for media coverage (Mon-Thurs., earlier in the day or to get a live feed on the evening news), traffic (rush hours and lunchtime) and group turn-out (before/after work, lunch hours and weekends).

At the action itself, it is important to have members of your group to acting as **marshalls** or **peace-keepers** to help facilitate the demonstration. Their job is to serve as a buffer between the demonstrators and the police or any other unfriendly presence. They are also an important communications link and can be used to keep all participants informed of changing plans or emergencies. They do not control or police the demo.

Another on-site job is that of **legal support**. Their job is to observe the action and write down any "happenings" or interactions with police, paying particular attention to names and badge numbers. They do not participate in the action, they are just interested bystanders with pen and paper. They do not have to be lawyers, though it is a good idea to have a lawyer either on-site or on-call, just in case. Trainings for **marshalls** and **legal observers**, as well as training for CD, is encouraged.

Finally, when planning a demonstration it is a good idea to make some contingency plans. What if you can't get your preferred site, or the group is larger or smaller than planned, or it rains, or you've got to get out of there quickly, etc. The biggest "what if" is always the police which is why marshalls, legal and a support system are always your best contingency.

MEDIA

You can get media coverage for your action. The sexier or larger or more creative or controversial your action, the easier it will be to get coverage. Call your local newspapers, radio, TV stations. Ask for the reporters who have covered AIDS stories or the even Community Desk and alert them to the upcoming demonstration. Give them the basic information (who, what, where, when why) and what might make it seem newsworthy (target, # of people involved, arrests -- if you are planning your action around an already newsworthy event, so much the better). Send them your fact sheets and flyers as well as some simple background information before the action and have plenty of extra copies on hand at the demo as well.

What the media wants is a good picture and rapidly digestible information or **soundbites**. The ideal **soundbite** is short, clear, simple, and punchy. Don't swamp them with details (that's what the fact sheets are for) and don't try to include every reason or issue. Just one or two sentences with one key thought poewrfully conveyed.

Regardless of the brilliance of your **visuals**, the clarity of your **soundbites** or the thoroughness of your **fact sheet**, the media still may not "get it." Document your own action. Bring cameras and video cameras. Don't be dependant on the mainstream media, create your own alternative media. This assures "coverage" of your demo, and will also give you the opportunity of providing the mainstream media with your own visuals. More importantly, the presence of video/cameras often works as a deterrent against police overreaction and violence. No cop wants to show up on the news clubbing a peaceful protester and, as recent events have indicated, video can be a very powerful tool in court.