

DRAFT 8-13-12

The Building Blocks of Strategic Policy Advocacy
by Roger L. Conner, J.D. and Benjamin Shaine, PhD.

©2012

The Basic Unit of Work: Action.

The basic unit of work in public policy advocacy consists of an action which communicates a message through a medium to an intended target for the purpose of influencing the behavior of the target by influencing the target's, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and conduct.

Each action is selected from a vast array of choices. A single email can be composed and sent in seconds, a street demonstration may take weeks of work, a report based on original research can require years.

The medium varies. Phone calls and meetings rely on the spoken word; emails and letters use written words; documentary films interweave images and audio; a street mime relies entirely on the human body; and so on.

The communication may be direct, as in a letter-writing campaign. It may be indirect, as in a press conference that reaches the target through the media or intermediaries.

The target can be a decision maker, the advocate's own supporters, the media, members of an opposing group, the interested public, or others.

Assuming that the message gets through, the intention is to affect the target's perceptions, attitudes or beliefs to the extent that, in combination with other factors, the target's future behavior is affected.

To summarize: the basic unit of work is

An *action*

that communicates a *message*

through a *medium*

to a *target* (or audience)

to *influence* the target's

positions, perceptions, attitudes or beliefs

to an extent that the target's expected *behavior* is affected.

It follows that *effective* public policy advocacy consists of selecting the right action to communicate the right message through the right medium to the right target at the right time.

Which raises more questions than it answers. Who are the most important targets? What message should be communicated? Which action will best communicate a message to a particular target? What if there is more than one target? How does it change the calculation if other people can hear the message? What about the risk that the message will be intercepted or distorted before reaching its target? And so on.

Each target is also embedded in networks of relationships, influence and authority that distort their perception of incoming messages and constrain their options. Some of these relationships are hidden, some are active, and some are inactive but capable of being aroused.

Considering the large number of potential targets and options for action, the available alternatives are effectively infinite. To complicate matters further, each advocate has to make these choices under crushing time pressure, incomplete information and a constant stream of suggestions, demands, ideas, warnings, brainstorming and more from meetings, phone calls, emails, newspaper articles, web sites, blogs, stories on TV and radio, scholarly journals, government reports, strategic planning retreats and more. An active public policy conflict resembles a chess game being played at high speed on a multi-dimensional chessboard where the players cannot see most of the opponent's pieces before making each move.

To outsiders and initiates the behavior of the players appears random. In reality, advocates rely on intuition—shortcuts based on training and experience—to narrow the choices and make decisions. The purpose of this course is to unpack this intuitive process with a series of analytical tools to help students and experienced practitioners to test what they think they know.

The Elements of an Advocacy Strategy:

In general usage, a strategy is a plan of action to achieve a desired goal. In policy advocacy, a well-developed strategy has at least five components: *Tactics*, a *story* about a conflict, a *preferred path* leading towards an improvement or resolution of the conflict, *targets* who have resources, power or authority to influence what is happening, and something that serves as a *motivation* or *incentive* for them to do so.

Assume that an environmental advocate has secured an invitation to give a speech (the *tactic*) at a convention of powerful investment bankers (*targets* with resources of influence). She might explain how a modest rise in the sea level would flood large swaths of coastal areas (the *story*) and document the value of commercial and industrial properties that would be damaged (*story* plus *motivation*); She might also point out that a carbon tax (*preferred policy path*) would not only protect against economic loss (*motivation*) but also create new opportunities for investments in alternative energy (*incentive*).

Assume that an environmental group decides that the policy changes required to combat global warming (*preferred path*) cannot be achieved if industry is united in opposition. Its strategy might be to form a coalition with entrepreneurs invested in alternative energy and shift the venue from Congress to a California by using the initiative process. That is precisely the strategy that led to the adoption The California Global Warming Solutions Act, also known as AB 32.¹

¹ See Franco, Guido, *et al*, "Linking Climate Change with Policy in California," 87 *Earth and Environmental Science* 7 (March 1, 2008), downloadable from <http://www.springerlink.com/content/vh1240w6122p284w/>.

Imagine five boxes labeled *tactics*, *stories*, *preferred path*, *targets* and *motivation*. The object of Strategic Advocacy is to find one piece from each box that fits the others.

Tactics refer to techniques used mobilize resources and communicate messages to targets. This piece of the puzzle requires advocates to answer questions such as: What are our resources? Which tactics will our constituency support? Is the target sympathetic or opposed to us? Do we want to be out in the open or behind the scenes? What will be the effect of today's choices on our power and influence over the long run? How might other stakeholders react?

Stories use words and symbols to explain what is happening, who is involved and why it matters. Advocates compete to have their story become the dominant narrative. They may frame a conflict in archetypal terms—good vs. evil, rich vs. poor, greed vs. generosity, man vs. nature—or choose more prosaic themes such as envy, fear or ignorance. An effective story answers questions such as: What is the conflict about? Is it serious or minor, short term or long term, getting worse or getting better? Who is affected? Why is it happening? Why isn't somebody doing something about it? Who and what is perpetuating the danger or blocking improvements?

An effective story also points towards the advocate's *preferred path*, the means by which the conflict could be resolved, reduced or managed. The preferred path may be concrete and narrow, as in a new gymnasium for a poor school, or it may be abstract and principled, as in challenging racism in a school system. It can be a first step, as in a planning process, or it can be comprehensive, as in a fully worked-out vision for transforming a policy domain. This piece of the puzzle answers questions such as: What is our preferred policy solution? How would it work? What is the sequence in which the changes should unfold? Why are the other alternatives less desirable?

The term *target* includes the intended audience (who) and the actions (what) that could shift the flow of events towards the preferred path. A vague or generalized description will lead to wasted energy. For example, "the media" is too broad to be useful. If the issue involves the city budget in a small town, the editor of the local newspaper might be the only journalist who matters. If the issue involves wilderness area management in the entire National Park Service, the story is big enough to interest specialty reporters at the New York Times and Washington Post. An article in one of these national papers will flow down to the free lance writers, magazine editors, web site managers and bloggers who keep track of the issue.

Having identified a preferred path and targets that could alter the flow of events, the challenge is *motivating* them to act. Do the targets need to be pushed or pulled? Threatened or enticed? If the decision maker is a friend, reassurance and public support is the standard approach. If s/he is hostile, threats and pressure may appropriate. On the other hand, threats might do more harm than good when dealing with a powerful target and a low-visibility issue. Effective advocates search behind the stereotypes and rhetoric for the values, interests, wants and needs that motivate their targets. What do they want? Why do they want it? What do they care about the most? Can the solution be adjusted or defined so that potential opponents see it as fulfilling (or at least consistent with) their wants?

So, Which Comes First?

The hazard of a list like *tactics, stories, a path forwards, targets and motivation* is the tendency to convert the words into a fixed menu or an orderly sequence. Public policy textbooks often encourage such thinking with models that direct students to *first* define the problem, look for alternative solutions *second*, and then turn to tactics for implementation and evaluation next.

In the real world there is no proper order of operations. There are many success stories of public policy advocates who succeeded by making one of the five domains their starting point before turning to the rest.

For example, a common approach is to develop a policy solution—a preferred path—and then find a constituency with matching interests and needs. In the 1970s, a group of economists developed “Supply Side Economics,” a theory that tax cuts for the highest income groups would stimulate economic activity to such an extent that *net* tax revenues would actually grow. Journalist Jude Wanniski helped popularize the notion with the “Laffer Curve,” a simple and accessible illustration of an otherwise complex argument. At about this same time, economic conservatives became more influential within the Republican Party. Their quest for lower marginal rates had historically met with resistance from academics and party leaders concerned about budget deficits. With Supply Side Economics they could have lower tax rates *and* deficit reduction.¹ When the GOP took control of the White House and the Congress, the Laffer Curve was cited to justify lowering tax rates without commensurate spending reductions.

Another approach is to focus on the motivation and needs of stakeholder groups and be flexible on both tactics and policy solutions. John Marks, founder of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), is one of the most successful non-profit executives in the field of peacemaking and conflict resolution. Marks contends that hot conflicts require the agent of change to be focused on the need for win-win outcomes that advance the interests and needs of all major parties; everything else—framing the conflict, options to resolve it and tactics for action—is up for grabs.

With such expansive flexibility, how does he decide what to do? Marks answers by quoting Napoleon who famously declared, “*On s’engage; et puis on voit*” (first I engage myself; only then do I see). As an example of this approach, SFCG was invited to intervene in Burundi when the genocide in neighboring Rwanda threatened to inflame the entire region. SFCG tried conventional dialogue and mediation with no success, but kept trying until they stumbled onto the idea of a radio soap opera about a Tutsi and Hutu family living next door to each other. The radio show became wildly popular with both ethnic groups and helped break the momentum of the escalating conflict.²

Just as often, effective advocacy groups build on a *tactic* that appears to have promise. In the early days of the their movement, environmental groups were concerned about

² Marks was selected as an ASHOKA fellow in 2008. The ASHOKA web site contains a good description of SFCG’s programs and how it adapted its strategy and solutions to become “the world’s biggest citizen-sector peacebuilding organization.” See “John Marks,” ASHOKA: INNOVATORS FOR THE PUBLIC, <http://www.ashoka.org/jmarks> (last visited Jun 3, 2010).

interstate highways, dams and nuclear power plants and other large-scale construction projects being built by government agencies and large corporations. For small NGOs pitted against these large entities, litigation was an ideal tactic. Preliminary injunctions on procedural grounds were easier to obtain than legislation. Public Interest Law Firms like the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) grew rapidly.³ Successful organizations recognize when tactics need to evolve, expand or change, and as defendants became more adept at litigation and the solutions came to be seen as more complex, environmental groups had to diversify.⁴ NRDC, for example, evolved into a full-service NGO with a large staff of specialists who conduct research, design policies and push legislation more often filing suit to block construction projects.⁵

Anchoring tactics and targets in a single story line or theme. One of the best-known advocates of the 1980s, Sol Alinsky, gained fame by defining every *conflict* as a manifestation of the excessive and unjust power of rich elites over poor masses. Armed with this belief, the appropriate *tactic* was for poor people to organize and apply relentless public pressure until the powerful interests gave in.⁶ Alinsky-style groups are still around, though now most community organizers take a more nuanced view of problems and how to solve them. Advocates of “Consensus Organizing,” for example, believe that low-income groups can usually find common ground with *some* of the rich and powerful, and frame the conflicts and solutions in a way that avoids a total confrontation with the other centers of power.⁷

There is no right or wrong place for advocates to begin. While the process is not linear, it is iterative. Regardless of the starting point, effective advocates constantly reassess their assumptions in all five domains in search of a successful combination. This can be challenging when working on a long-term conflict. The organizations and movements involved have well-established positions about the “real” problem, the “root” causes of the conflict, “meaningful” solutions, the “truth” about the interests and needs that drive “us” and “them,” and the “necessary” tactics to bring about change. The quotation marks around the adjectives in the previous sentence are intentional. Most actors in a complex policy conflict sincerely believe that their perceptions are truth, that “we” are objective and fair, while the “other side” is deceitful and manipulative. Objective self-assessments are not always welcomed.

³ NRDC describes its own start in these words: “It began with a court battle over a power plant slated for Storm King Mountain and matured with test cases modeled on tactics pioneered by the NAACP.”

NRDC: E-law: What Started It All?, <http://72.32.110.154/legislation/helaw.asp> (last visited Jun 3, 2010).

⁴ BURTON ALLEN WEISBROD, JOEL F. HANDLER & NEIL K. KOMESAR, PUBLIC INTEREST LAW: AN ECONOMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS 551 - 559 (1978).

⁵ NRDC stated in 2010 that it has “more than 350 lawyers, scientists and other professionals” and a membership of 1.3 million. NRDC: About NRDC, <http://www.nrdc.org/about/> (last visited Jun 3, 2010).

⁶ Alinsky opened his classic work with these words: “*The Prince* was written for Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold onto power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.” SAUL ALINSKY, RULES FOR RADICALS 3 (1989).

⁷ “Consensus organizing,” is defined as “[t]ying the self-interest of the community to the self-interest of others to achieve a common goal.” MIKE EICHLER, CONSENSUS ORGANIZING: BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF MUTUAL SELF INTEREST 7 (illustrated edition ed. 2007).

Summary and Implications:

The purpose of public policy advocacy is to change the actual course of future events—the “arc of history”—thus advancing the values and interests of the advocate’s client, employer, cause, organization, or movement.

An effective advocacy strategy optimizes five variables simultaneously: The available *tactics*; *stories* that frame the conflict in a compelling way; a *preferred path* going forward; *targets*, “who needs to do what” to shift the flow of events towards the preferred path; and something which could *motivate* the targets to act properly.

To the extent that the hypotheses in this essay are correct, the most effective advocates will be self-aware, intentional and constantly on guard against biased thinking and erroneous assumptions.