

Got Action Logic?

By Daniel Hunter

There are many aspects to carrying out a good action. They may be fun and creative, or well-planned or poorly executed. They could have lots of people or few. Many groups spend the bulk of their time on these elements of actions – and they are important. Yet perhaps the most key areas of action-planning regularly gets short-shifted: the action itself, what it is, what it stands for – what we call **action logic**.

Action logic is the degree your action makes sense logically from the standpoint of someone not in your group. It should have a logic: *this* thing happened, therefore we will do *this* thing. This is particularly true in direct action, when you are trying to promote a positive policy or stop an oppressive behavior.

Action logic has clear reasoning

The best action logic can be summarized easily. The action flows from the situation:

- When refused service at lunch counters for being black, citizens kept sitting at the counter. They further highlighted the injustice by modeling dignified behavior.¹
- When the British government held a strangling monopoly on salt, Gandhi designed a direct action campaign whose centerpiece was make salt illegally.
- When the Free Trade Area of Americas was negotiating a massive “free trade” agreement across all the Americas in secret, a rag-tag group of protestors openly and publicly announced their intention to “liberate” the texts through a “nonviolent search and seizure.”
- When North Philadelphians were denied adequate trash service, they collected it up and then dropped the trash onto the steps of City Hall. They left a bill for doing City Hall’s job. They got service reinstated quickly.

Note the logic behind each action. The action challenges the specific injustice. Not allowed to make salt? So we do. Not allowed to get documents? We go take them ourselves. Not given trash service? We do it ourselves – and leave them for you to clean up.

That is a world of a difference from the world of protesting, which merely speaks out against an injustice with a rally, a march, or a petition-drive. Imagine the British government not allowing you to make salt. So you ... hold a rally demanding they change their policy? They would wait until the heat of the action is over – and continue their policy happily.

The clearest action logic places the powerholders in a **double-bind** – what some call **dilemma demonstrations**. Take the free trade agreement example. The public was largely siding with that rag-tag crew of protestors because their request was so simple. The Prime Minister was therefore in a tough spot: damned if he made the documents public, but he was also damned if he didn’t – people who go searching his offices to make them public. Hence, the actions place the powerholders in a dilemma.

Action logic is really only answered by your friendly casual observer (which if you're successful is as active as most people will ever get). When they witness your action, do most of them say, "That makes sense why they are doing it?" (Even while they may still disagree.)

Perhaps my "favorite" example of an action with no action logic was a group of about fifty protestors outside of a major Republican national gathering. While the gathering was happening inside the convention hall, protestors were ten blocks away sitting at a high-traffic intersection, blocking cars.

One car owner came up to them and furiously asked, "Why are you blocking my way to work?" When told to shut down the gathering, the car owner turned red, "I hate the Republicans inside, too. But I am trying to go to work! Your blocking regular people – not them! Let me through!" She was refused. The woman turned away and muttered, "Arrest them all."

That action made no "sense" to that casual observer or most that day. How was blocking an intersection related to the issue of Republican policy? Instead of making allies, they turned people off to their cause.

That is an extreme case. But the challenge remains to bring more action logic to our work.

Take a chunk of your vision: implement it now

One way to think about good action is to take a piece of your vision and act it out. Put it in place now; or act as if it was put in place. It might be illegal, like making salt, or it might just be outside the system. The point is that it is implementing a piece of your vision today.

If your goal is no decisions with public participation, take a chapter from Casino-Free Philadelphia and do a "public filibuster" to keep speaking until they shut down the meeting, kick all of you out, or give the public a chance for input.

Or if your vision is a city with a vibrant waterfront, try an action inspired from Neighbors Allied for the Best Riverfront and hold a picnic on abandoned land to model what the riverfront will look like when it is opened to the public?

Get the idea? Good. *Now go design actions with more logic!*

¹ A Historical Note on how civil rights-era actions are misunderstood: My take is that too often we captured the *tactics* of the civil rights-era movements, but not their meaning. We learned to march on Washington, DC and do sit-ins. But at the time those tactics expanded the range of behaviors acceptable in our society. Historians remind us that the March on Washington was seen as a riot waiting to happen – black people, so we were told, could not peaceably congregate in large numbers in DC, another signal of racism. So the peaceable assembly of that size expanded people's sense of the possible. Similarly, sit-ins responded to blacks not being served at lunch counters. Now, those tactics are widely recognized and understood. They no longer push the boundary of people's sense of the possible. What are the actions that you wish would happen everyday that are not? How can that fit into your campaign? And, finally, which of those actions will resonate with other people?