

Is your organisation an effective change agency?

The case for learning practical politics

Campaigning by voluntary organisations changes lives for the better. Effective leaders are instinctively political and know how to influence others to support their aims. Campaigning organisations improve society by how they work and what they do. Yet most voluntary organisations are wary of being “political” and rarely develop the political skills of their Board, staff, volunteers or supporters. As the economic crisis bites and decisions over priorities become tougher, political skills are more important than ever.

Guidance on charity law says that “charities may undertake campaigning and political activity as a positive way of furthering or supporting their purposes.”¹ Government and Opposition both recognise that campaigning by the voluntary sector is essential for a healthy democracy. For voluntary organisations, effective political action is often essential to achieving their aims.

People set up voluntary organisations to meet needs and solve problems in society. Often their first response is to provide a service. Since the need is usually greater than the resources available, fundraising becomes a core activity. Fundraising is a form of campaigning, aimed at persuading people to give money. But sometimes politics can solve problems better by addressing causes: if people are falling off a cliff, tending their wounds is not enough. Political action is needed to build a fence at the top. The voluntary sector should not just to care for the casualties. It has a responsibility to help solve problems through democratic politics.

Effective campaigning gets results: Jubilee 2000 persuaded G7 governments to cancel \$100bn of debt owned by poor countries, releasing more money for development than a millennium of Christian Aid weeks. ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) won a ban on smoking in public places in 2006 which could save over 2,000 lives and billions of pounds a year. The Empty Homes Agency is working with local authorities to bring thousands of properties into use as a result of its amendment to the Housing Act 2004.

But these successes are small compared with achievements of private sector lobbying. The campaigns to deregulate finance unleashed billions for the wealthy, dwarfing Jubilee 2000’s modest victory. The tobacco industry stalled action on smoking for decades. Arms, cars, oil, supermarkets and many other industries invest millions in campaigning for their cause.

The most effective campaigns are often invisible – quietly influencing thinking, priorities and funding before the public even knows there is an issue. Many industries and professions are so deeply embedded in government and other centres of power that we do not think of them as campaigners, but ceaseless lobbying behind the scenes protects their interests. As Sun Tzu says in *The Art of War*, supreme excellence consists of winning without fighting.

¹ Charity Commission, CC9 - *Speaking Out - Guidance on Campaigning and Political Activity by Charities*, www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc9.asp#2

Political skills are critical for voluntary organisation to achieve their objectives, even if they do not 'campaign'. Practical politics should be an integral part of any strategy, alongside service delivery, fund-raising, staff development and communications.

What is campaigning?

Campaigning is about influencing attitudes, behaviour or policies to get what you want. Effective campaigning involves planning, positioning, networking, organising and lobbying to shift power and resources to solve a problem. This means focusing on the people with most power to bring about the solution you want. They may be in your own organisation, national or local government, a company, industry or a section of the public.

Some campaigns need to be visible, using action, stories and images to spark a public debate about the problem and how to deal with it. Direct action, mass movements and stunts can win a seat at the table or even change the shape, location and people round the table itself, as with Make Poverty History or Jubilee 2000.

But relationships with decision-makers and the people who influence them are key. "Office politics" are the heart of decision-making. A campaign may win the argument, the vote or even a revolution but lose the office politics that follow. Effective campaigners are therefore also on boards, advisory groups or even in government to see changes through. The skill is knowing when and how to lobby from within or when to campaign in public.

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Core abilities of an effective change agency

1. **Clarity of purpose, vision and values** so that just mentioning your organisation puts your issues on the agenda.
2. **Walk the talk:** practical action and analyses rooted in experience gives credibility to any campaign. The test of an effective change agency is that it is respected by those who disagree as well as by supporters.
3. **Know your stuff:** be a learning organisation, where everyone shares frontline experience and understands the issues, power structures and conflicting theories about the problem you aim to solve. Make evaluation, impact analysis and research routine parts of your work.

Learn from your opposition and competing solutions to the problem you are tackling: what are their motives, mindsets, and what keeps them awake at night?

4. **Question!** Good questions open many doors and minds. **Decision Maker Dialogue**² is one way of enabling powerful people to think differently about a problem and come to a new solution. The test is: is your issue near the top of the agenda of relevant decision-makers and power structures?
5. **Strategy:** work backwards from your vision (the outcome you want, your core purpose) to identify stages between where you are to the world you want: What big changes are necessary to achieve your organisation's purpose?

This may take you away from your organisation's perceived mission or current role, in which case your first political task is to change the organisation.

The test of a good strategy is that all staff and supporters know how their work contributes towards the bigger picture.

² Oxford Research Group - *Everyone's Guide to Achieving Change*: www.oxfrg.co.uk

- Concentrate on crunch points:** focus on major decision-making moments, such as an act of parliament, election, summit meeting or appointments to key posts. Get in early to define the problem and shape outcome, not just the argument – and prepare to follow up: success comes from implementation, not the decision itself.
- Get in position:** change in an organisation, society or government is like a dance: get in position, communicate through actions as well as words, build a relationship and then get the result (see figure).

The test is that 1) your organisation is part of the discussion when your issue is on the agenda, whether others like it or not, and 2) the action you want is clear to those who would have to do it.

- Cultivate your networks:** Even the biggest voluntary organisations are small compared with the issues they address and the powers of the state and corporations, so potential gains from cooperation are large.

A policy-focused alliance increases impact and influence at any level. The key is to have clear ground rules, be open and work on practical projects together, including learning and knowledge sharing. Sharing relationships, encouraging staff to network, organising joint activities and campaigns are vital.

- Communicate:** seek to understand those you wish to influence and use actions, language and evidence they understand, not that which appeals to you. This is often the hardest challenge for campaigners. If you are motivated by justice and those you seek to influence are motivated by fear, money or faith, there will be little communication until you speak their language.
- Celebrate!** Many small successes enable you to build, while a perceived setbacks can last a long time. An effective strategy has many small achievable steps, with occasional leaps when opportunities arise. You may not be able to plan for these, but with good analysis and networks you can expect them.

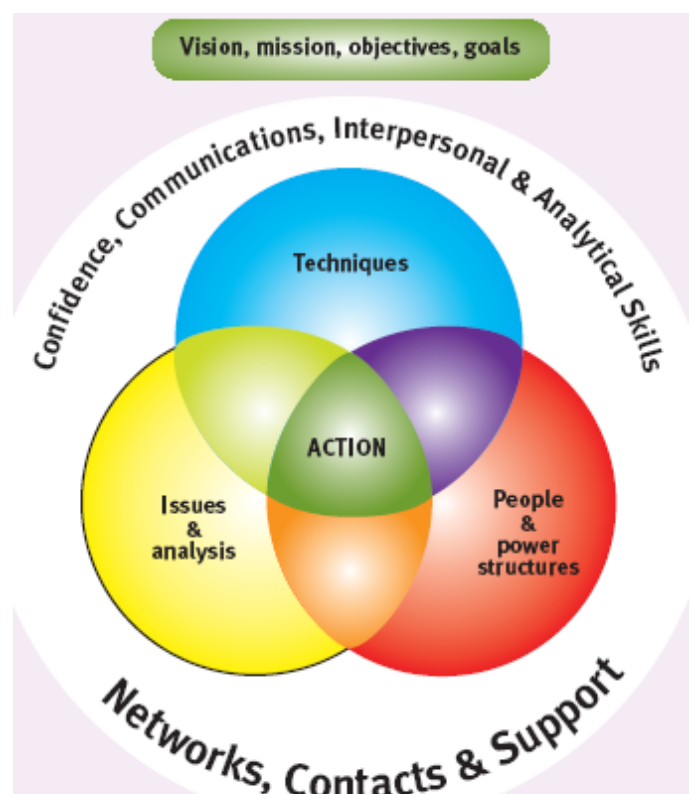
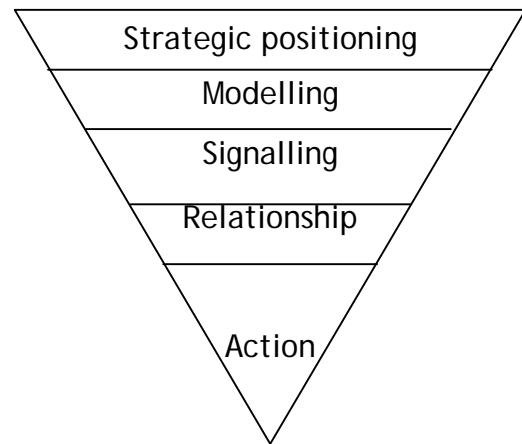
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Learning for practical politics

Political ability is largely learnt by experience, alongside practitioners. But a great deal of knowledge and skill can also be developed through case studies, action learning, coaching and workshops with experienced change agents. The skills and knowledge required are complex (see diagram).

An effective change agency will ensure that it's Board, staff and supporters develop their confidence and abilities to work politically, so that it governs itself well and also influences political decisions on the issues it cares about.

Training for practical politics and campaigning is growing, through campaigning charities, NCVO's Campaigning Effectiveness programme, the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, Workers' Education Association, Parliamentary Outreach Service and other initiatives. But



for democracy to be effective, practical political education needs to be as widespread as provision for basic skills.

Conclusion

The voluntary sector deals with some of the most challenging problems facing society. To solve these problems, voluntary organisations often need to influence attitudes, behaviour, policy and legislation. This takes political skill and campaigning ability. Organisations need to build campaigning into their core strategy and well as development of staff, supporters and users to use their political skills and voice for your cause.

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Titus Alexander is a campaign trainer and consultant who recently organised regional roadshows on campaign effectiveness for the NCVO/Capacity Builders Improving Support programme. For more on the case for learning practical politics, download *Learning Power*: <http://static.novas.org/files/learning-power-262.pdf>

For a free campaign guide and resource list, email: titusalexander3@googlemail.com