

# Thumbnail Tactics

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The quest to miniaturize is no doubt part of the impulse of our current age of computerization and our rage to embrace technology, no matter how obscure. The notion that millions of megabytes of information can now be stored on computer chips so small that one needs a microscope to bring them to vision has infected our own work, and helped drive the attention deficit of our times even to organizers. Organizing is a trade with distinction and discipline – a craft requiring deliberate and painstaking years of practice and performance in order to achieve not only competency, but also proficiency commensurate with the stewardship we share in utilizing these skills for a constituency and a membership.

The notion that there might be a set of crib notes, an efficient shortcut, or a simple checklist that one can tape to the inside of an organizers “toolbox” almost seems a dangerous contradiction: a tempting lure to devilment or an invitation to rote rather than understanding. Nowhere does this seem more perilous than in the area of tactics, which embedded in strategy, come closer to an art form than anything else in our trade. Inevitably then a sense of thumbnail tactics devolves into a series of warnings, every bit as much as it seeks to render advice.

Nonetheless in a weakened moment I find that I have been compromised and somehow have agreed to assist a comrade-in-arms of years outstanding to produce exactly such a list, no matter how absurd the task is at its face. So, I have already offered a sober and dire warning of the consequences of taking this thumbnail sketch any too seriously as a definitive guide to tactics, and I repeat it here – there are no shortcuts about tactics, no magic bullets, no surefire successes or hidden secrets – tactics are organic and evolutionary – let those be the first lessons!

But, first, a simple definition is required. Tactics are the way we act. Tactical expressions by organizations are manifest in actions. Tactics are deeds. Tactics express the way people take action in different situations at different times. Tactics are the clear articulation of collective enterprise translated into action.

With the simple definition is also a simple warning: tactics are not strategy! Often the single most common mistake committed by organizers is confusing the two, which almost invariably leads to defeat, absence uncommon and unlikely luck, which is rarely found in our work.

- Tactics are organic: You have to develop a strategy to win. You have to understand the issue facing the organization and/or its constituency fully, and you have to be able to measure viscerally the level of anger that people bring to the fight. The tactical menu is immense and varied, so selections take thought, discussion, and decision. The tactics chosen in a campaign have to be imprinted on the strategy to win. Leaders, members, and organizers all have to share and see the vision – the “movie in our minds” as we often call it that places the tactics in a natural and seamless way within the strategy. The closer the tactics are to feeling in synch with the strategy, the more organic, and therefore effective, the tactics will become. The more organic the tactics are, the more deeply embedded and fully owned by the participants, the more naturally they develop and the more powerful they are.
- Tactics are evolutionary: In order to win, tactics have to constantly evolve and change. The times and temperament in which we work are constantly shifting, and effective tactics have to

evolve in anticipation of these significant and subtle shifts, and tailor themselves to the opening and closing of opportunity for action and reaction, initiative and response. Tools and techniques available for tactical action also change with the times, and we have to be able to adapt accordingly. Not all of the changes produce more activity – e-actions and web-based sites and petitions mobilize passivity, more than activity and have attendant dangers. At the same time arrests as a tactic are currently experiencing a diminished capacity. We have to be able to constantly supplement our tactical selection through adaptation to evolutionary changes.

- Tactics are dynamic: This seems so simple, but it's easy to forget: if you do the same thing repeatedly, the target will invariably adjust accordingly to be able to mute and dilute the effectiveness of your tactic. Effective tactics are not set stage pieces where everyone has assigned and accepted roles to play in some kind of theater of the impotent and absurd. Effective tactics are dynamic, not inert. Remember tactics speak to action, which forces reaction. An action that produces inaction is by definition an ineffective tactic. There may be a reason for constant tactical repetition in the same way there are classic rote openings in chess if one is trying to communicate a certain staid political message or simply demonstrate some latent threat such as one finds in the frequently reiterative and elaborately rehearsed “accountability actions” in some schools of organizing, but such tactics to be successful rely and are dependent on the target to acquiesce as a player within the charade. Dynamic tactics are required for situations where the outcome is uncertain and defined by the organizational membership and constituency, rather than simply being an accommodation to the agreed limits set by existing authority and power. No one quibbles with what works, but there are always limits to what will work with any tactic that is not dynamic.

- Tactics require sequencing and escalation: Decades ago on this point I used to say: you don't kill a squirrel with an elephant gun. In the way things change organizers no longer really understand what that means – perhaps they never did! The point though is that tactics require sequencing; they need architecture with an ascending design. Tactics embedded in a strategy or campaign scenario have to anticipate reaction and opposition, rather than agreement and concession, therefore ideally there needs to be a tactical sequencing that increases both the critical content or militancy of the action, as well as the mass participation involved. In simpler terms one needs to have available a list of tactics that can increase with severity and pop through the duration of the campaign as available alternatives for your membership as they deepen their commitment to victory. Furthermore, one has to have a tactical selection that increases the participation of your constituency during the campaign, and therefore escalates the level of the action. This is all just common sense – if you throw your strongest punch first, and the target proves they can take it without budging, then your comeback is weaker, and you will lose – or get less than your members demand.

- Tactics require timing: We do not have all day to win. Timing is important – the heat has to be kept on, and once turned off, is virtually impossible to re-ignite. Timing is not when you are ready or feel like it, but when it has to happen to unsettle the target, is unexpected, and increases the pressure.

- Tactics operate in public space: In building mass organization tactics have to operate in public space where our members and constituency live in order to either build power or create change.

One can not build mass participation through actions which occur in private space, even though these interchanges (e.g. negotiations) can be critical, one has to be able to convert them into the public forum.

- Tactics require passion and reflect anger: We believe in direct action tactics, which are more than a letter slipped under the door or an anonymous email. Such tactics need require the ability to reflect the passion and anger of the members about an issue or injustice, particularity as the tactical force of the campaign escalates. Passion and anger also allows unpredictability and uncertainty. They add the level of danger to action, which keeps it real. I hope you are still with me, are you? Tactics are not simply engineering – ways to order the way people act in an expected way in public space about grievances. Effective tactics have to keep it real. Sometimes that means that even you will be surprised.

If can use these thumbnail tactical guides, coupled with a whole lot of people willing to take action, you still will not have an even chance, but at least your organization will be part of the struggle to win power and create change. There are no shortcuts, remember, so stopping here is not because we have exhausted the topic, but because we are probably at the limits of your attention.

Remember: if it moves people, it's a good tactic; if it then wins as well, then it's an effective tactic. Good luck!