

## PRINCIPLE

# DON'T EXPECT A CONCRETE OUTCOME FROM A SYMBOLIC ACTION

Concrete actions have measurable goals and are designed to have a direct physical impact. Communicative actions tend to have more symbolic goals. Know the difference and plan accordingly.

## CONTRIBUTED BY

### Joshua Kahn Russell

Josh Kahn Russell is an organizer and strategist serving movements for social justice and ecological balance. He has worked as an action coordinator, facilitator, and trainer with many groups including the Ruckus Society and 350.org, and has helped win campaigns against banks, oil companies, logging corporations, and coal barons.

---

## "PEOPLE OFTEN GET DISCOURAGED WHEN THEY TAKE PART IN A COMMUNICATIVE ACTION WHILE EXPECTING A CONCRETE OUTCOME."

---

Any given tactic — say, a blockade — can be both *concrete* and *communicative*. One isn't better than the other; the trick is understand the difference, so you don't expect a concrete outcome from a mostly symbolic action, or vice versa.

A tactic is *concrete* to the degree that it seeks to achieve a specific, quantifiable objective. For example, anti-war organizers may seek to blockade a port to keep a shipment of weapons from passing through. There is a specific goal, a tangible cost for the port and the companies that use it, and a way to evaluate success: Either we stop the weapons or we don't.

A tactic is *communicative* when it communicates a political position, set of values, or worldview. A mass march in response to an injustice can fall into this category. Communicative tactics can be useful for exciting our base, building networks, seeking to sway public opinion, or scaring a target, but often do not have a *specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound* (S.M.A.R.T.) goal. Success is more qualitative.

To succeed, concrete tactics must force a response from the target (see: PRINCIPLE: Put your target in a decision dilemma). Communicative tactics might have a target, but can also work without one.

## RELATED TOOLS

### Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Citizens' Posse
- Occupy Wall Street
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- Whose Tea Party?
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation

### Tactics

- Banner hang
- Blockade
- Civil disobedience
- Cultural disobedience
- Flash mob
- Guerrilla projection
- Hashtag hijack
- Mass street action
- Occupation

### Principles

While some actions can be both communicative and concrete, it is important to understand the difference. People often get discouraged when they take part in a communicative action and expect a concrete outcome. It's best to be clear from the outset what kind of action it is, so that everyone knows how to measure — and contribute to — the action's impact.

It is also important to remember that "concrete" and "communicative" are ways to measure the *instrumental* outcome of an action, as opposed to its *expressive* dimension (see: THEORY: Expressive and instrumental actions). The expressive part of your action is focused on the self-expression of participants, while the instrumental outcome of an action is concerned with your action's more direct goal-oriented impacts (both concrete and communicative).

Imagine an economic justice group aiming to blockade the entrance to the offices of the banking firm Goldman Sachs. At the action planning meeting, because there was a lack of clarity about whether the action was communicative or concrete, the discussion was at first circular and unproductive. Some wanted to lock arms in a simple human blockade, others wanted to up the ante by using chains and other "hard gear." Using gear has the benefit of staying power (it's more difficult for the police to remove you), but it carries much greater risk and is more difficult to deploy. It became clear the group had neither time nor numbers to blockade every single exit. Therefore, if the action was conceived as concrete (trying to shut down Goldman Sachs), it would fail because it could not achieve a realistic instrumental outcome. If it was communicative, however — a symbolic act to amplify a message — it could be successful. Furthermore, a communicative action might have a powerful expressive outcome by building the resolve, connection, and commitment of participants by offering them a cathartic, transformative experience. When participants agreed to carry out a communicative action, the staying power of the blockade gear was no longer needed: There was no tactical advantage to holding the space longer. Instead, the group decided to go with a human blockade, which played better in the media (a main indicator of success for them in this action). If activists hadn't assessed the purpose of their action and understood their goals (particularly, to what degree their goals were communicative rather than concrete) they likely would have made less strategic choices.

*Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.*

## LEARN MORE

A Tiny Blockades Book

The Ruckus Society, 2005

<https://sydneycommunists.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/a-tiny-little-blockades-booklet-reduced.pdf>

- Consider your audience
- Praxis makes perfect
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Turn the tables
- Use the power of ritual

## Theories

- Action logic
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Palace coup
- Society of the spectacle

## Methodologies

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Points of intervention
- SMART objectives

## TAGS

Action design, Communications, Direct action