

How to Start a Non-Hierarchical Direct Action Group

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The following are suggestions for direct action organizing. These are meant as guidelines—feel free to improvise process as necessary.

Direct action utilizes hands-on intervention to directly challenge hierarchies. By using spectacle to expose hypocrisies, direct action terrorizes the status quo and revitalizes public space. In the process, it builds a delicious and defiant culture of resistance. Direct action encourages people to push the boundaries of acceptable behavior in order to create new possibilities for organizing, self-determination and activism.

Why non-hierarchical organizing?

In this country we are encouraged to think that voting is a participatory act of “democratic” choice, when in reality it means that a majority controls the agenda. Non-hierarchical organizing means that everyone participates in the process. Though there may be other models for non-hierarchical organizing, we have found consensus to be the most effective.

Consensus Process

Consensus means everyone comes to agreement before any decision can be made. In order for meetings to run as smoothly as possible, at the beginning of each meeting, someone volunteers to facilitate. The facilitator compiles a list of agenda items at the start of the meeting, keeps track of who wants to speak, calls on speakers, makes sure speakers stay on topic and keeps the agenda moving. After a proposal for action and a discussion of this proposal, the facilitator calls for consensus when a decision seems imminent; this involves asking who is in favor, who objects and who abstains. If there are any objections, the group formulates alternate proposals until consensus can be reached. Some groups have a formal process for tallying abstentions in order to decide if a proposal should be revisited. In the case of GAY SHAME, we have found that consensus occurs remarkably easily, since we have worked through our common politics and we discuss issues extensively prior to calling for consensus. We only use the more formal consensus process in the case of extreme disagreement.

If someone believes that a decision close to consensus is contradictory to the goals of the action or group, that person can block consensus. In the case of GAY SHAME, this has only happened one time in our four-year history. Of course, consensus decisions may always be revisited in the future. Usually, though, it’s all flower power and SSRIs here at GAY SHAME.

There are many different effective models for creating consensus— feel free to share your strategies with us.

Working It Out

- If you know people who share common goals, politics and strategies then contact them to arrange a time/place to meet and brainstorm ideas for a call to plan an action. If you don’t know anyone else who shares your politics, skip to step 2.
- Make a call to plan an action: including a purpose/target (for example, GAY SHAME’s all to challenge the rabid consumerist monster that is corporate pride).

- Create regular, free, public, accessible, meeting time and space (for example, GAY SHAME started meeting in a café with a lot of empty meeting space, now we meet in the back room of a sympathetic bookstore). Assume that all meetings are being surveilled by law enforcement and concerned citizens and plan separate spaces for organizing covert aspects of actions.

Fundraising is No Fun

True, the world is run on money and that does not exclude your direct action, but it is important to figure out ways to avoid spending money in order to further your critique of capitalism. Many people have boring day jobs that give them access to many useful resources, such as: paint, paper, markers, copies, food, etc. Borrowing, stealing and sharing can build relationships that grant writing, silent auctions and walk-a-thons never can. As a last resort, if you must shell out money then try to figure out ways to best distribute the costs.

Should You Approach the Media?

The mainstream media will probably not be on your side, especially when you're doing something that actually challenges the existing power structure that controls most media outlets. Always remember that the mainstream media consists of corporate hacks, vultures and ghouls all vying for a chance to exploit you into your grave. Therefore, it is important to discuss early on whether you want to approach the mainstream media at all, and if so, how to ensure that your message gets across, if at all possible. Also, discuss alternative media such as "progressive" newspapers, pirate or non-commercial radio, "public" television, indymedia or any other options that may or may not be better than the corporate crap. Of course, you can also make your own media (take this web site, for example).

Planning the Action

Start with an issue/target/theme, decide upon appropriate tactics to make action as effective as possible. Of course, each of these tactics requires advance planning and a clearly understood logistical structure (see list of suggested roles below). Different types of actions may include: propaganda distribution, redecoration and public demonstration. Tactics include the following:

Wheatpasting: the act of gluing flyers in public spaces, such as street poles, abandoned buildings, billboards, newspaper boxes, etc. This is useful for getting the word out about demonstrations as well as creating media satire and political critique. This could also be useful for participating in boring mass demonstrations where hordes of liberals can serve as useful cover for meaningful dialogue.

Stenciling: the act of spray-painting messages through handmade cutouts made of cardboard, folder-paper or plastic. This is useful for longer term messages in public spaces such as sidewalks, abandoned buildings, trashcans, etc.

Marching in the streets: this is a confrontational, fun and participatory way to get from starting point to destination. Marches are useful for drawing people's attention to the spectacle, and usually work best when there are large numbers of participants. Whenever possible, we suggest

marching in the streets and not on the sidewalk—in order to energize, excite and aggravate as much as possible.

Blocking traffic / Preventing entrance into buildings: We love cars and corporations! Blocking the flow of traffic (human and vehicle) increases the disruptive potential of a march, and makes that dreary commute so much more enticing. Of course, this requires advance planning and a clearly understood logistical structure (see list of suggested roles below).

Noise: Pump up the volume! Noise amplifies the mood and tone of a protest. Some tools for noise may include: bullhorns, sound systems, whistles, air horns, handmade drums, screaming, musical instruments and those throat muscles.

Property redecoration: This usually works best to brighten up dreary storefronts, billboards, police cars and other capitalist enterprises by cover of night. Liberating glass from the confines of selected window frames often facilitates transparency and free speech. Use your imagination!

Building or office take-over or squatting: Office take-over involves occupying a hostile work environment in order to disrupt business as usual. An office take-over requires an outside action/media plan that directs attention to the spectacle. Building take-over or squatting involves a prolonged stay in an unoccupied edifice, for housing or to make the space an accessible resource for free community building activities, such as sex, gardening, cooking, art, frolicking, shitting, sleeping, or hiding from parents or other abusers.

Harassing public figures: Is something we would never do. Just kidding—this is a fun way to scare and impair the people in power. Try your local Hall of Records for updating your Kwanzaa card list.

Getting arrested to make a political point: This must be planned well ahead of time, with all support roles listed below.

After the discussion of tactics is completed, it is time to make some gorgeous propaganda.

Creating Propaganda

When we say propaganda, we mean written materials that clearly represent the group's consensual agenda. Propaganda distribution can be its own action, as with a wheatpasted flier or a stencil addressing a particular issue. Propaganda is also useful for getting people to a public demonstration or disseminating information. Propaganda may include:

Fliers: Put as much information as you have on them in as interesting and concise and glamorous way as possible.

Zines: Derived from "magazine," these are a form of handmade self-publishing and are often photocopied, but can be silkscreened, printed, painted, handwritten, etc., and may involve mixed media. This information made its first debut in a zine!

Stickers: Fun to hand out at demos or stick them in places where wheatpasting or stenciling are not viable options.

Patches: People love free art.

Website: You're on one right now. Great for disseminating information, but never rely on it.

Press release: To get those horrible media monsters to cover your brilliant, courageous action or intervention. A press release should always be succinct and inflammatory. Send out before deadline (call each outlet for specifics) and always include phone number for the designated media liaison.

Strategy/Logistics

Start planning as far ahead as possible. Discuss how best to confront the planned issue/target/theme. Figure out how to make the action as direct and confrontational as possible. Create a plan of action, including: meeting place/destination, route (if necessary), itinerary, theatrics, timing specifics and plans for alternate options. It is important to walk the route and assess the conditions ahead of time (take note of traffic, pedestrians, visibility, police presence, nearby events, the latest greatest Harry Potter pajama party, etc.) Decide how to effectively communicate the plan and objectives of the action to the crowd. Figure out what to do in case participants depart from the plan or unnecessarily endanger other protesters or bystanders. Review the entire strategy multiple times, devising pre-scouted alternate plans in case the original plan becomes too difficult or dangerous to pull off.

After initial difficulties with the law, GAY SHAME decided to plan each action as if it is a planned civil disobedience arrest scenario, just in case of the likely event that the cops get violent. Therefore, we almost always include the following roles:

Marshals are the front line between the crowd and the police— usually we arrange for front, back and side marshals. Front marshals make sure the crowd gets moving and moves slowly enough that there are no gaps and that people do not get divided from one another (by traffic, stoplights, cops, vigilantes, etc.). Back marshals ensure that the crowd keeps moving and that nobody gets left behind. Side marshals stand between the crowd and the cops, make sure no one gets singled out for arrest or police violence and facilitate route maneuvering. Marshals are the first people to take the street and encourage the crowd to join in. They facilitate the flow of the crowd along the planned route. Just before the festivities begin, the marshals meet to review the plan for the action. Sometimes the hysteria of “action day” inspires people to try nonconsented plans that could jeopardize the effectiveness of the action and unnecessarily endanger people. If the original plan becomes too risky to execute, it is good to have a reliable system of communication in order to decide when to use one of the consensed alternate plans (for example, if the police are blocking your route and arrests are not part of your strategy).

Police Negotiators talk to the cops in charge in order to make them less likely to get violent. Only designated police negotiators communicate with the cops so that they don’t get wary of sudden shifts in the action. Police negotiators never reveal the true plan of the action, but instead try to make the cops comfortable enough to allow plans to progress. Tactics may include pretending to be law-abiding, or claiming not to know what’s really going on. (“I don’t know who’s in charge, but let me go find out.”)

Lawyers can help you break the law. Before your action, it is good to find an activist attorney who is ready and willing to represent you in case of arrest. Make sure to distribute a legal contact number to everyone at the action—this could be the direct number for a lawyer or a legal support team. It is a good idea to hand out permanent markers so that everyone can write the legal number on their bodies, in case personal effects get lost in a scuffle or confiscated after detainment or arrest. Lawyers often know how harshly certain acts may be punished, and can offer advice as long as (for legal purposes) you speak as if you have no real intention of getting involved in those acts. This conversation should happen outside of the office or any other location likely to be under surveillance.

Legal Observers stand outside of the action to make sure that the police are behaving. Designated legal observers wear an item of clothing that indicates their status—police are not supposed

to arrest them. Legal observers inform activists of their rights and document arrests and police abuse. Legal observers make sure to find out the name and contact person for every arrestee. They also write down badge numbers of all police in attendance as well as noting license plate numbers of any violent motorists or vigilantes and take notes on the progression of events. Legal observers should preferably be lawyers or those who've been through legal observer training.

Media Liaison communicates directly with the media. This person volunteers ahead of time, and makes sure to familiarize themselves with the consensed-upon issues and message of the group, and agrees to talk primarily along the lines of the press release. It is a good idea to think of catchy soundbites ahead of time, since this is probably all that will be reported. Media liaison directly approaches any identified media persons and hands them press packet if available. Since the media liaison's job is to talk to the press, it is not a good idea for them to get arrested. Other participants approached by media should direct them to the media liaison.

Food service Everybody loves free food, so it's always a good idea to provide it. We like to serve vegan food! Arrange ahead of time for a cooking plan, serving arrangement, and a way to keep track of the food during the action.

Medics provide first-aid in case of emergency, and generally wear glamorous medical gear to call attention to their duties.

Scouts generally dress relatively "normal," in order to discreetly travel ahead on the route and look for police activity or other problems or unexpected changes and communicate this information to the marshals.

Communication specialists run from front to back and side to side of the demonstration in order to assess the situation and communicate directly with marshals and the crowd. If possible, it is good to designate one communication specialist to deliver messages and information between marshals and one to communicate messages from marshals to the crowd. Communication specialists should always attempt to avoid arrest, and wear comfortable shoes.

Documentation specialists make sure that the cops are being watched so that everyone stays as safe as possible. It is generally a good idea to have several video cameras, still cameras and other recording devices. This work also serves to document the action for the public record, since the media isn't going to do it for us. It is always a good idea to make our own media so that we aren't so swiftly disappeared from history.

Direct action can often become hierarchical, since there is usually a group of activists who have planned the action ahead of time and are familiar with the goals, tactics and strategies. Therefore, at the action it is important to remain conscious of things to do in order to create a participatory environment and break down the division between organizers and participants. In spite of much work around this issue, we have not always succeeded in bridging this divide—we would love to hear your ideas.

Always make sure to talk to everyone in the crowd and make sure that people are aware of the goals and strategies of the action. Distribute propaganda as widely as possible and engage people in conversation about the issues. Move through the crowd to figure out who would like to wield a delicious accessory, sign or prop. Share tasks whenever possible and make new friends.

Making Props

Permitted marches are ineffective. Black Blocs are boring. Speak-outs are tedious. Make your action festive, colorful, ridiculous and fierce by developing themes that engage the issue in the most direct manner possible. Once the group decides upon a strategy, then it is time to develop visual aids to emphasize the intended message of the action. These may include:

Signs should be clear, clever and concise.

Banners are good for blocking traffic and hanging off buildings.

Effigies are replicas of people made from flammable materials that are set on fire to make a statement against the person in question.

Costumes: dump out grandma's steamer trunk, we're going to church, Mary!

Art Objects: These are not just for the museum, darling. Always bring assorted theatrical toys to illuminate the theme and devastate the scene.

Keep track of banners, props, etc. for retrieval after action. We always forget this part and have to recreate our props, but it's probably better to save them for use in the future, unless this involves risk of arrest.

Arrestibility and Jail Support Discussion

Prior to the action, discuss comfort level of people in terms of arrest. It's important to talk about how different people will experience jail differently along the lines of race, class, body type, gender, sexuality, age, ability, health, diet, education, religion, language, citizenship/immigration status, record of arrest/incarceration or ties with criminalized/targeted persons, etc.

Jail support means coming to consensus ahead of time about what to do when someone is detained, arrested, jailed or disappeared. This should include:

- Designated support people to make sure that no one is left to rot in jail
- Making arrangements ahead of time for legal representation
- Facilitating communication between people who are separated in different parts of the jail and between people inside and outside the jail
- Pressuring city officials to get people out of jail (this can include finding personal contact information for "sympathetic" elected officials and other people who have power to help get the people out of jail)
- Waiting outside of the jail until people get released—always bring food, water, love and other necessities

Emergency Press Conference (In Case People Are Kept in Jail)

GAY SHAME only stages a press conference in order to get people out of jail if they are not cited and released immediately—this is a post-action emergency procedure, since press conferences are generally a pointless waste of time or a way for non-profits to get more funding. The mainstream media is not your friend, but sometimes you can trick them.

- Create a press release about the events leading up to the incarceration, including the time and date of the press conference. A good place to hold a press conference may be the main entrance of the jail or in front of city hall.
- Sending out the press release to any and all forms of media. Also it is a good strategy to create a press packet containing a press release, photos of the incident (if they are not incriminating), the media liaison's contact information and a copy of the press release for the original action.
- It's good to have someone who is knowledgeable of the purpose of the original protest and what the issues were leading up to the arrest. Also it is good to have brutalized and/or indignant activists, "innocent" bystanders, lawyer(s) and stupid celebrities speak at the press conference.

Post-Action Discussion

Always meet as soon as possible after an action to discuss what worked brilliantly, what failed miserably, what worked miserably and what failed brilliantly. Figure out strategies for making the next action more effective, participatory and inspiring. Sometimes this discussion ends quickly and sometimes it lasts for weeks. Savor every minute of it.

P.A.D.S. (Post Action Depression Syndrome)

After your first action, you may find yourselves experiencing a wide range of extreme responses: mania, ecstasy, dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, dysphoria, vomiting, rage, enlightenment, empowerment, inspiration, disappointment, confusion, numbness, betrayal, vulnerability, euphoria, sensitivity, awareness, invulnerability, wanderlust or enchantment. This is common. It is important to continue organizing. Brainstorm future projects to help keep the group focused, effective and inventive. Don't be worried if people hate you—when you take an unpopular stance (and we certainly hope you do), expect to be unpopular.

This may be a great time to collectively write a statement of purpose in order to communicate the group's politics. This may help build consensus within the group, encourage more people to get involved and create future actions that work together to build a sustainable culture of resistance. A statement of purpose may give the group focus and direction in order to work toward future actions that articulate the politics of the group in as many relevant directions as possible. Of course, this may also lead to arguing endlessly over differences instead of building an environment where direct action can flourish, so proceed with caution, creativity, glamour, intrigue and clamor.

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