

Problems and issues come to us in at least two different ways. Sometimes, we have the luxury of working with community members and other partners to sort through the intricacies of a particular problem (e.g., inadequate public education) and choose an issue to focus on. Other times, the issue chooses us (e.g., there are unsafe conditions in our local school and we and our community partners need to respond immediately.)

To ensure that action on a particular issue contributes to the health of the community effort and its long term strength, effectiveness and power, it is important that advocates and their partners select issues based on criteria such as the following:

1. Did the issue grow directly out of relational work and a community process?
2. Is the issue deeply felt?
3. Is the issue divisive?
4. Is the issue winnable?
5. Will the effort build and strengthen the community?
6. Will the effort provide teachable moments and leadership development opportunities for participants that will increase the power and sophistication of the coalition?
7. Is the issue “actionable?”

Community lawyers – and organizers – use these criteria to choose issues:

1. Did the issue grow directly out of relational work and a community process?

Using traditional lawyering skills, it is possible “solve” a legal issue without community involvement. While this approach may create a change, it is unlikely to change the mindset of the decision makers and is unlikely to strengthen the power of the community institutions you are working with to address new issues. Conversely, issues that are identified by and grow directly from the community will more effectively involve it, will give participants a sense of their power, and will, if successful, increase the ability of these community institutions to effectively pursue solutions to issues that arise in the future.

2. Is the issue deeply felt? We may use relational and community processes to identify the issues, but the community may still lack the energy necessary to successfully resolve them. Another way to pose this question is whether there is a sufficient number of leaders invested in this issue and with the energy necessary to carry it to a successful conclusion.

Other questions that can help determine whether an issue is deeply felt are:

- Is there a core group of leaders who have a direct and personal interest in the issue and will benefit directly from a successful resolution of the issue? This assumes that people ordinarily act out of self interest and that this is a good thing.
- Are there leaders who have personal stories and experiences that relate directly to the issue?
- Are there other leaders who have, through their actions, demonstrated a clear commitment to the issue?

3. Is the issue divisive? Are there members of the community / institution who will object to this framing of the issue? If so, consider carefully whether there are other issues that are equally important and do not pose this difficulty. For example, while in a traditional legal context we may focus on liberalizing suspension and expulsion processes, in a community-based effort to improve educational facilities and outcomes, this issue is likely to be highly divisive.

4. Is the issue winnable? Losing a battle is demoralizing for everyone, but even more so for those who rarely win. Our clients and community institutions have lost more battles than they have won. Accordingly, it is important that any issue-oriented battle be one that is reasonably calculated to be winnable. The degree to which a loss may be risked is directly proportional to the experience of the leaders. Leaders who have experienced victories and have a sense of their own power as a result will be more able to tolerate a loss and move on from it. On the other hand, individuals new to issue-oriented advocacy will take initial losses hard and may not want to participate further.

An issue is ‘winnable’ in a political setting only if there is an identifiable decision-maker who is reasonably calculated to accede to your demand. Only if you can reach a principled and calculated assessment that these conditions exist should an issue be considered winnable. To reach this point, these questions must be asked and answered:

- a. Who are the decision makers?
 - b. What is their self-interest with respect to your core demands?
 - c. What power do they have?
 - d. What power do you have over them, e.g., political power, moral power, power to influence the public’s view of them, economic power?
 - e. Who are their allies and can they be influenced too, or do they already support your position?
 - f. Can the issue be personalized to the decision makers?
 - g. Do you know why your position should prevail? Here, research and analysis are critical.
 - h. Can you make the case in terms the general public will understand and sympathize with?
5. **Will the effort build and strengthen the community?** Will it bring new leaders and institutions that feel deeply about the issue to the coalition, building power and influence for the coalition?
6. **Will the effort provide teachable moments and leadership development opportunities for participants that will increase the power and sophistication of the coalition?**
Community lawyers should consider the extent to which work on a particular issue provides opportunities for community members to obtain the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will support their abilities to take on increasing levels of responsibilities and leadership--initially within the group, and ultimately, within the larger community.
7. **Is the issue “actionable?”** Organizers like to say that action is to organizing as oxygen is to blood. A corollary is that leaders will only remain invested in and committed to an effort when they are called on and permitted to act on a regular basis. Some organizers believe that leaders must be able to act at least every 4-6 weeks to remain energized by and committed to an issue. Therefore, to successfully undertake an issue, you must be able to break it up into a set of actions that can be undertaken with this level of frequency.

An entire action plan must be devised that calls for direct involvement and action by leaders on a regular basis. In this context an “action” can be either internal or external. Action types

include research, internal relational activities, external relational activities, media activities, negotiation, and direct public action. For each action you must identify the resources necessary to carry it out and determine whether these resources are or will be available. Actions should be placed on a time line and the resources necessary for each identified when the action is proposed. Action can also be recognition events for those involved - affirming events designed to recognize the work that has been done to date.

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