

A Civilian's Guide to Direct Action

What It Is, What It's Good for, How It Works

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Direct action, simply put, means cutting out the middleman: solving problems yourself rather than petitioning the authorities or relying on external institutions. Any action that sidesteps regulations and representation to accomplish goals directly is direct action—it includes everything from blockading airports to helping refugees escape to safety and organizing programs to liberate your community from reliance on capitalism. Here we present a step-by-step guide to organizing and carrying out direct action, from the first planning stages to the debrief at the end, including legal support, media strategy, and proper security.

There are countless scenarios in which you might want to employ direct action. Perhaps representatives of despicable multinational corporations are invading your town to hold a meeting, and you want to do more than simply hold a sign; perhaps they've been there a long time, operating franchises that exploit workers and ravage the environment, and you want to hinder their misdeeds; perhaps you want to organize a festive, community-oriented event such as a street party. Direct action can plant a public garden in an abandoned lot or defend it by paralyzing bulldozers; it can occupy empty buildings to house the homeless or shut down government offices. Whether you're acting in secret with a trusted friend or in a mass action with thousands of people, the basic elements are the same.

Direct Action in a Nutshell: A Step-by-Step Guide

First of All...

Brainstorming: Choose a project and devise a plan

Brainstorming can start with a problem you want to solve, or a social contribution you want to make; it can be informed by the resources you have, the kind of experience you desire, or the people you want to work with. You can plot a single short adventure or a long-term campaign. Often, the best brainstorming occurs in the course of daydreams and informal conversations—it's good policy to trust that your craziest ideas can become reality and try them out.

By the same token, even when attending events organized by others, it's best to bring a plan so you can contribute in your own way.

If it makes sense for your action to be organized openly, establish a format, such as a public assembly, in which to work out a strategy and tactics. Invite friends, or circulate fliers, or go from door to door announcing it. Come up with your own proposals ahead of time, in case no one else does.

For more clandestine actions, brainstorm in a secure environment with a trusted friend or two. Keep your ideas to yourselves as you hash them out so you won't have already given them away when you're ready to try them.

Goals: Establish and prioritize the goals of the action

Who is your action for? Is it directed at on-the-spot spectators, corporate media viewers, the owners of specific corporations, their stockholders, the police and government, other members of the community, the participants themselves?

What is it intended to accomplish? Is it meant to communicate ideas, to call attention to an injustice, to inspire people, to secure resources, to set a particular tone, to inflict crippling material

damages, to provide a deterrent, to demonstrate a model others can apply, to serve as a learning and bonding experience for those involved?

Establishing a shared understanding of the goals of the action from the outset will save a lot of headaches later when your plans shift and potential conflicts arise.

Structure

Affinity Groups: Work tightly with those you know

One of the most efficient and secure models for direct action organizing is the affinity group model. An affinity group is a group of friends who trust each other deeply and share the same goals; working together over a long period of time, they become efficient and effective.

For a small action, the members of an affinity group can take on different roles. For a larger action, affinity groups can work with other affinity groups in a “cluster,” each group playing a role. This can make decision-making easier than it would be in one big mass, as each group can send a representative to a spokescouncil. Clusters of affinity groups can work together over long periods, building trust and effectiveness.

Recruiting: Bring in other individuals and groups carefully

Once you have a plan to propose, figure out how many people you need to accomplish it. If your plan requires secrecy, invite only people you trust to keep secrets and that you are sure will want to join in—everyone you invite who doesn’t end up participating is a needless security risk. Extend invitations one by one, or affinity group by affinity group, so those who decide against participating will not know anything about the others involved. Start by asking general questions about what a potential participant could be interested in, and don’t reveal critical details of the plan such as exact target or date until he or she is ready to make a commitment. As people are brought into a plan and go on to bring in others, make sure everyone has the same understanding of the appropriate degree of security.

As more people become involved in the project, it’s important that everyone understands how much commitment is expected of them. Sometimes the group that first presents a plan will be more invested in it than others; if they do months of work preparing, only to have another group they depended on drop out at the last minute, all that work is wasted. Everyone shares the responsibility of being honest from the beginning about what is realistic to expect of them. At the same time, those who initiate a project should be careful to share ownership with everyone else involved.

Dynamics: Make sure power is distributed evenly within your group

Make all decisions in a participatory and consensual manner. If your group is large enough to warrant it, use an informal or formal consensus meeting process to make sure all voices are heard: set the agenda of each meeting together and pick a facilitator to keep things on track. The more that everyone participates, the better informed the decisions you make will be.

Be aware of internal dynamics that may be unbalanced, such as those between people with different backgrounds, or between local organizers and participants from out of town. The more

everyone participates in planning and preparing for the action, the more invested in its success everyone will be. A group with good internal dynamics is smarter than any individual can be; individuals can bring in ideas, but together the group can work out the best way to apply them.

Make sure everyone feels supported and comfortable throughout the project; check in with each other outside of formal structures as well as inside them. Though often overlooked, maintaining morale is a critical aspect of successful direct action organizing. Keep level heads in the face of surprises and uncertainty.

The Basics

Security Culture: Circulate information on a need-to-know basis

Security culture is a way to avoid unhealthy paranoia by minimizing risks at all times. If you and your friends always conduct yourselves wisely, you'll have less to fear from infiltration and surveillance.

The essence of security culture is that information is shared on a need-to-know basis. In some cases, the whole town needs to know about your action for it to be a success; in others, it is crucial that the action is never spoken of outside the circle of those directly involved. Everyone privy to the action needs to share a sense of what level of security has been deemed appropriate, and to respect others' needs regarding safety.

Consent is as important in security as it is in sexual intimacy; it is never acceptable to violate another's wishes regarding security issues. Make your own security needs explicit from the beginning; swear an oath of silence together if need be. Never talk about your or others' involvement in past actions, however long ago, except with their express permission.

When a group comes together to work on a project, make sure everyone present is vouched for by others in the group as reliable and trustworthy. To protect each other, you should be prepared to remain silent under interrogation and legal pressure.

From the beginning of a project, you should operate according to the highest possible level of security it might require; you can always become less cautious later, but if you start out being careless you close off a lot of options.

Be aware of all the ways your actions can be monitored or tracked: the records of surveillance cameras, the purchases you make, the places you go and the people with whom you are seen, the location of meetings, the items you throw in your trash, the websites you visit, the files on your computer, the fingerprints you leave (on the batteries inside a flashlight as well as on the outside of it, for example), and virtually everything that has to do with a phone. Devise codes and prepare alibis as need be.

Legal Support: Prepare infrastructure to provide support during and after the action

Everyone involved in the action should be aware of and prepared for the risks they are taking and the potential criminal charges associated with them. It's important not to take things farther than you feel ready to go: if you get hurt or arrested while engaging in a level of risk for which you are not emotionally prepared, the effects can be debilitating. Far better that you get started

slowly, building a sustainable involvement with direct action projects that can continue over a lifetime, than rush into an action, have a bad experience, and swear off all such activity.

If your action may result in arrests, prepare a legal support structure for those who participate. This could include a legal aid number for arrestees to call, legal observers to monitor and document the actions of police, money for bail, lawyers to provide immediate support to arrestees and to represent them in court, and a circle of people prepared to offer emotional, financial, and logistical support throughout court cases.

The legal aid number should be open to receive incoming calls at all times throughout the action; bear in mind that in some cases, you cannot call a cell phone from jail. The legal aid number should not incriminate the arrestees or the people who receive the calls—if part of your alibi is that you don't know each other, don't all call the same number from jail. If you fear you will forget the number, write it on a concealed part of your body in permanent marker. The person operating the legal aid number should know the full names of those who may be arrested, so as to check on their status.

To bail someone out of jail, you can either give the entire amount of the bail to the court system, in which case you should receive it back after the legal process is finally concluded, or you can go to a bail bondsman and pay about 10% of that; in the latter case, the bondsman's fees may cost you a significant amount of money. If no one can pay bail, an arrestee may sit in jail until the court date, although in the case of minor infractions it can happen that police release people on their own recognizance so as not to have to deal with them.

If you are risking arrest, decide whether you want to have your identification on you to expedite processing, or to be without it, so they cannot identify you immediately. A large group of arrestees who refuse to give their information can tie up the legal process and sometimes gain bargaining power. If you need medication, consider hiding it on your person, or carry a note from a doctor explaining what you need.

Find a sympathetic and trustworthy lawyer—or perhaps a few of them, since a lawyer cannot represent more than one defendant on the same charges. You can research which lawyers have taken on similar cases in the past, or approach the American Civil Liberties Union or National Lawyers Guild. If you don't give away anything sensitive, you can ask sympathetic lawyers about the charges associated with hypothetical acts, or specify the dates and times you may require their services—but don't let them know anything that could implicate them. In order to do their job, they need to be able to prove that they are not connected to anything illegal.

Any community whose members may suffer arrest would do well to establish a bail fund in advance; this can save a lot of running around in the middle of emergencies. Throw benefit shows, sell t-shirts, solicit donations from wealthy sympathizers, have your friends at the university book you speaking dates at their school in return for student funds. Make sure the bail fund stays with someone who is even-handed, trustworthy, and always easy to reach.

Likewise, consider what your media strategy will be—whether it will be wise to direct public attention and support to arrestees.

Media: Establish what coverage you want and get it

Long before an action, when you are establishing and prioritizing goals, work out exactly how much media coverage you want, from which sources, and how you are going to obtain or avoid it. This could mean composing and sending out a press release (Who, What, When, Where, How,

Why) or a communiqué, electing a spokesperson to represent your project to the press, inviting corporate or independent reporters to the action or to a press conference, faxing announcements or making press calls, offering interviews (in person or anonymously over a burner phone), or having members of your group cover documentation themselves. If you want to avoid certain kinds of coverage, it could also mean assigning a participant to make sure photographers do not aim their cameras at you.

If you are communicating with the media, compose *talking points*, sound bites that your spokesperson repeats to be sure they get in the media coverage. Give representatives of the press as little material to work with as possible so they will have to use the part you want them to. Keep track of which reporters tend to provide positive coverage, and approach them personally. If you have a website, get this address into corporate media coverage to reroute their viewers to your media. You can also provide information to the public yourselves by posterizing, pirate radio, speaking events, or starting conversations door to door.

If your action warrants high security, send your communiqué securely: for example, from a public computer that leaves no record of who uses it. Be aware of how the devices you use can incriminate you.

Groundwork

Planning: Study the context, chart a strategy, plan for different scenarios

Proper planning is the essence of safe, effective direct action. Keeping your goals and priorities in mind along with the resources you have to work with, plot and compare different strategies. Weigh out the risks and potential rewards of each: always pick the safest way to accomplish a given objective, and make sure you can afford to take the risks you choose. It sometimes happens that as the planning process goes on, a project will get more and more ambitious and hazardous, until some of those involved start to have doubts; at that point, it may be necessary to work out a safer or scaled-down version of the plan, so it can still take place.

There are countless factors to take into account in planning. You must pick the most effective tactics in the context of the current social and political situation. You must pick the best location for the action and take into account all its attributes; you must pick the best date and time of day. You must bear in mind the others who will be in the area, and how they will react—will they be sympathetic, or may hostile vigilantes interfere with your activities? You must coordinate the timing of different parts of the action, predicting how long each will take, and figure out how those involved in the action will communicate.

When predicting the responses of others—say, for example, the police—consider the factors influencing them: Are they expecting what you're planning, or do you have the element of surprise? If you have the advantage of surprise, how long will it last? Will there be a lot of attention focused on the event? Will it be immediately apparent what you are doing? Will there be middle-class citizens or reporters around, and will their presence put a damper on the authorities' response? What is their strategy likely to be, based on previous precedents for police behavior in this context? Do their bosses want them to come down hard on you—or to avoid provoking a scene? How well do they communicate, how fast do they move, where are they located, what routes will they take?

Don't underestimate the challenges of simple logistical matters, such as transporting people or communicating in stressful situations. Don't forget to plan an exit strategy, either.

Because plans rarely come off exactly as they are laid, it's important to have backup plans worked out for different scenarios: "If ____, we'll ____; if ____, we'll ____." Have a few different objectives in mind, in case your first choice turns out to be impossible. Having a basic structure for communications and decision-making in place will help you to be prepared for situations that play out differently than any of the scenarios you had imagined.

Be careful not to put others at risk for your actions; the authorities will probably charge whomever they get their hands on with the worst crimes they can, so it's important both to get those who take risks out of the area safely and to make sure serious charges can't stick to anyone else. In some cases, you can bring together multi-leveled groups in which everyone knows the general goal but only a few know critical details such as what the target is or who is to carry out the riskiest activity.

Be prepared for the best-case scenario as well as the worst. New ideas, if they are good ones, tend to fail because people don't take them far enough, whereas older ideas usually fail because they are too familiar to everyone, including the authorities. Sometimes the best results come from applying familiar tactics in entirely new settings.

Look back in time for precedents, occasions when similar actions were attempted in similar contexts. These can be very instructive. As you gather years of experience and learn from others' successes and failures, you'll develop skills for predicting and preparing for a wide variety of situations.

Preparation: Gather equipment and dress appropriately

Once your plans are laid, draw up a timeline until your action, counting backwards from the big day to establish the deadlines for all the pieces that must be in place.

Early on in the planning, work out what funding, materials, and other resources you will need and how to obtain them. If security is a priority, obtain what you need in such a way that it cannot be traced to you; affinity groups from out of town can acquire potentially incriminating materials far from the site of the action.

Make sure everyone has appropriate clothes for the action, including different outfits in layers if necessary. Take security issues into account as they relate to clothing: if everyone is dressing in black for anonymity, be sure no one's clothes have unique identifying features; likewise, if you're going to be posing as random passers-by, remember that civilian dress is different in Miami than it is in Seattle. If timing is important, make sure everyone's watches are synchronized.

Double-check to make sure everything is ready by your deadline. Go through a practice run, verbally if not physically. If participants are unfamiliar with the area, distribute maps. If need be, plant necessary materials in the area in advance of the action—being careful not to give anything away in the process.

Scouting: Study the site of the action and stay abreast of changes

Before the action, study the area carefully. Chart safe routes in and out; look for hiding places, obstacles, potential targets, and surveillance cameras (including those in ATMs and stoplights). Note how long it takes to travel key distances, and be aware of the visibility from and of key

locations. How close are the authorities, how long will it take them to arrive? Can their approach be delayed? Who else is in the area?

While scouting, be careful not to call attention to yourself or leave an obvious record of your passing. Be sure to do at least some of your scouting at the same time of day as the planned action, and if possible do a quick check immediately before it to make sure nothing has changed. If your action calls for daunting tasks, such as climbing a steep rooftop, it may be good to make an actual practice run at some point.

Information can also be gathered from photos, maps, and brochures; aerial maps or blueprints may be available. In some cases you can obtain information from a tourist center, or call and ask questions on a pretext (as a student doing a report, for example), or even receive a guided tour. Once you've collected a lot of information, it can be helpful to consolidate the important parts into a map suited to your needs. Be careful to dispose of all files and paperwork securely.

Roles: Divide up responsibilities and set up decision-making structures

Identify all the roles necessary to pull off your plan, and make sure every one of these is filled. Some potential roles include:

- lookouts
- scouts
- police liaisons
- media spokespeople
- internal (“embedded”) media
- legal aid contacts
- legal observers
- medics
- distractions
- “plants” (for example, people disguised as innocent bystanders who are ready to intervene if necessary, or who will politely honk their horns while a barricade is erected in front of them)
- getaway drivers
- people to transport materials
- people to receive information and make tactical decisions
- people to carry out the actual action

In some situations, it is wise to have understudies for important roles, in case it turns out at the last minute that someone can't participate. This is especially true if you don't know in advance what the date of your action will be—for example, if it is to coincide with an event that you cannot predict in advance, such as the announcement of a verdict or a declaration of war.

Diplomacy: Consider the way the action will affect others

If your action is taking place during or as part of a larger event, there may be large meetings at which different groups try to coordinate their efforts. These can be useful, but they tend to consume a lot of time and energy, so make sure you go into them knowing exactly what you hope to accomplish.

Whether you're acting in the midst of thousands of other activists or far away from anyone, take into account the way your actions will affect other people. Will they endanger others? Will they provoke police repression? If so, will others bear the brunt of it, and is it possible to offset this? Will your actions make it more difficult for other people to do important work in a given community? Are there negotiations or reassurances you should engage in before, during, or after the action?

Honor all agreements you make with other groups; some might be willing to help you, with or without knowledge of the specific details of what you're doing. Over time, if you prove reliable and considerate, you'll build alliances with them.

During and After the Action

Awareness: Stay alert throughout the action

Awareness is key to the success of any action. Often, the atmosphere can change very quickly. It is important to keep up with what is going on around you, and to have established in advance how you will react to a given scenario. For example, is the arrival of a single police car a big deal? How about ten? Is it common for police to tail marchers in this city? While you can never be certain of exactly what will happen, going over possible scenarios in advance and having an idea of how your group wants to deal with them will give everyone a more solid idea of how to react—and how not to overreact—as the situation develops.

When informing others of a development, announce the raw information, not the conclusions you may have drawn from it (“The police are putting on gas masks,” not “They’re going to gas us!”), so others can draw their own conclusions. Resist the urge to panic, and the tendency to get carried away as well.

Communications: Keep each other informed

During the action, scouts can keep track of changes in the terrain such as arriving police, crowd movements, others’ activities nearby, and safe zones. They can use communication systems such as burner phones, encrypted text messaging, two-way radios, or whistles to keep in touch; audio or visual signals such as car horns or fireworks can also serve. A police scanner can be used to monitor police communications.

To make communication more efficient, scouts can report to an individual or sub-group in the center of the action; in a larger setting, they can phone in their findings to a central information hub, which others can call with questions.

Just as communications equipment can make you more efficient and effective, it also increases the risk of surveillance. You can use codes and code names, but be judicious—complicated codes are easy to forget, and prosecutors can argue that your codes meant something more drastic than

they actually did. Even if no other communication system is used, it can be useful to have the option of an “abort” signal for emergencies.

Dispersal: Quit while you’re ahead

A safe escape is the most commonly overlooked part of direct action organizing. Be sure to have an exit strategy worked out in advance. If you’ll be in a large group, especially with others who haven’t been part of the planning process, think about how to avoid the herd mentality that keeps crowds together after it would be better to split up. Know when to press your advantage, and when to quit—when to run as fast as you can, and when to walk nonchalantly. Discard anything that could incriminate you, if possible in a place it will not be found; wait to change your appearance until you’re sure you’re no longer under observation.

If need be, gather in a safe place afterwards and make sure everyone is accounted for; collect bail money, seek outside assistance, write press releases. While everyone involved is still around, get contact information for anyone who might be able to testify or provide documentation to assist arrestees.

Debriefing: Regroup to discuss what went well and what lessons can be learned

After the action, destroy any evidence that could be used against you; keep tools that could be tied to the action in a hiding place outside your home. If you may have to testify in court at some date in the far future, consider writing down all the details you might need to remember on a piece of paper and concealing it in some place where you can be sure it will never be found. Get together in a secure setting and go over what happened. Follow up on ongoing matters, such as supporting those with court cases, providing further clarification to the public as to the goals of and ideas behind the action, and sorting out conflicts. Celebrate your victories, offer each other constructive criticism, learn from your mistakes, and lay plans for the next project.

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