HOW TO ORGANIZE DIRECT ACTION

If your demonstration is to go smoothly and to accomplish its purpose, you'll need to organize it carefully. There are really four major bases to cover in putting together a public demonstration:

- Planning, planning, planning
- Lead time
- Communication
- Follow-up

PLANNING, PLANNING, PLANNING: THINKING IT THROUGH

If there is a single most important piece to organizing a demonstration, it's planning it completely beforehand. The demonstration must have a coordinator and a group of organizers who work together before, during, and after the event to plan and carry it out. They need to decide what the demonstration will be like, and to anticipate potential problems and plan for them as well.

Decide what you want to accomplish. What is (are) the exact goal(s) of the demonstration? It's important to decide whether you're advocating for or supporting a position, protesting something, or planning a specific action. Your purpose will help to determine the tone and shape of the demonstration. If advocacy is your goal, the demonstration might be upbeat, singing the praises of whatever you're advocating for. If your purpose is protest, or righting a wrong, then its tone will be different. Tone is important, because what you accomplish might depend on how the demonstration is viewed. If your demonstration leans too much toward entertainment and feel-good sentiment, it may not be taken seriously. If it's frightening, people may not listen to its message.

Decide on what specific things you'd like to actually happen -- and not happen -- at the demonstration. How do people get to the space where the demonstration will be held? How easily can they leave? How do you want them to behave while they're there? Will there be some sort of action, and will it possibly lead to arrest or other confrontation with the authorities? How will you handle that? A crowd can be kept happy with food and entertainment, or angered by aggressive speechmaking: it's up to the organizers to think through what they want.

It's important to confer with the authorities beforehand about use of space, to obtain the proper permits, and to work out with police and other officials how things will be handled, so that there are no misunderstandings. Make sure that those who are likely to attend the demonstration know what to expect and what you expect of them. If people understand that violence is unacceptable, or that it's important that everyone follow a certain route, they're more likely to behave accordingly.

Decide who you're trying to reach with the demonstration's message, and who you want to attend. Contact other organizations, coalitions, etc. long before and get them to endorse (and attend) the demonstration. The time, place, and program should be geared to the desired audience.

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main

Legislators or other elected officials: The demonstration should be where they are -- City Hall, the State House--on a day when they're in session. Elected officials pay attention to voters. This is a great situation for members of the target population, especially those from key legislators' districts, to tell their stories, and for advocates to use their knowledge of statistics to underline the magnitude of the issue and the size of the constituency affected by it.

General public: If you're aiming your message at the general public, then you might want a very large demonstration, or one that's particularly unusual or interesting, staged in a public place at a busy time, so that it will attract both onlookers and media attention. It's even better if there's a draw, in the form of entertainment and/or celebrities. And the demonstration should be advertised publicly, through flyers and posters in neighborhoods, public service announcements on radio and TV, clubs and churches, etc.

Target population: If you're trying to publicize an initiative with those you hope will take advantage of it, it should be in their neighborhood, and in their language as well. It might help if children and families are encouraged to come, and if familiar figures from the target group itself are part of the program. Presentations should be aimed at providing practical information and helping people understand the issue and how it relates to them.

Plan your program. What you're actually going to do at the demonstration also depends upon what you want to accomplish and who your audience is. There needs to be a clear structure for what will happen, and everything in the program should be geared directly to the desired results of the demonstration. Block out the schedule to the minute, and let participants know well beforehand how long they have in the program.

Some possibilities for programs or program elements:

Speeches may convince some people and bore others, although some speakers and speeches (Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" comes immediately to mind) are so powerful that they electrify anyone hearing them. Celebrity speakers may draw people and attention to the demonstration and to your issue. Speeches may be meant to convey information, convert the unconvinced, or simply fire up the crowd and supporters. Members of a target population (people who've learned to read as adults, AIDS sufferers, etc.) may be the most eloquent spokespersons for their issue.

Marches or other movement of demonstrators can serve to show the extent of support for your issue, and can dramatize--by the route chosen--where a problem is located, and who should be involved in a solution. They can also help to build group spirit, to expose large numbers of people to the existence of the issue, and to attract media attention.

Entertainment. Music may energize people, address their emotions, and help to develop group spirit. It's usually geared to the subject of the rally, with songs written for the occasion, for instance. Theater can be used to ridicule ideas being protested, as was done very effectively for years by such groups as the San Francisco Mime Troupe. If the entertainment is particularly good or includes celebrity performers, it's almost sure to attract media and bystanders.

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main

A symbolic activity, such as each person lighting a candle, group song or chanting of slogans, the display of a picture or document, prayer, etc. can be a powerful way to communicate a message, solidify a group, and gain public attention. It can also be seen as nothing more than an attention-grabbing device. This kind of activity has to make sense for your particular issue and demonstration.

Picketing may be used simply to make a point, or to discourage people from entering or patronizing a particular building or space because of their sympathy with the picketers' issue. In either case, it requires a high degree of organization, but it creates a vivid picture in people's minds, and makes a strong point. It can also make your organization seem more militant than it is, or than you want it to be perceived.

Civil actions or civil disobedience can range from legal actions designed to accomplish a specific purpose (large numbers of people witnessing an event that the perpetrators would have preferred to keep quiet, such as the destruction of a neighborhood landmark) to a few people engaging in a symbolic action designed to get them arrested or otherwise challenged (chaining themselves to the gate of a government building, refusing publicly to pay taxes, etc.) to mass actions like civil rights marches or the blocking of troop movements in Tien An Men Square. Demonstrators taking part in civil disobedience must be willing to be arrested and face punishment, and organizers must train them beforehand to respond appropriately to the police and to the whole arrest procedure. Organizers must also be aware of the impact of these actions on how their issue is perceived by the public.

Decide where the demonstration will be. Your decision will depend on timing, on how large a space you need (How many people do you expect or hope for?), on whether your demonstration is a reaction to something specific in a specific place, and on who you want to reach with your message. However, there are some important general questions you need to answer in choosing a place. Is it available for the time you need it? Do you need, and can you get, a permit to use it? Will it cost you anything, and can you afford it? Is it accessible to those with disabilities? The answers to these questions will help you determine where to hold the demonstration.

Decide on a specific day, date and time. Sometimes, the day, date, and time are determined for you: a counter-demonstration, for example, will happen at the same time as the demonstration it is meant to counter; a particular vote in the legislature will take place on a particular day. But in general, these elements are determined by three things:

The availability of the people you want to reach (A rally at the State House on Saturday won't attract many legislators, nor will the 'solidarity with Working Mothers' demonstration attract many working mothers if it's on Tuesday at 2:00 PM... when most of them are working.)

The weather (You might not want to hold an outdoor demonstration in Minnesota in January... or in Florida in July). Do you need a rain or snow date?

Conflicts with other events (You don't want to compete with the free Rolling Stones concert in Central Park).

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main

Decide on how you'll get people to come. To some extent, this depends on how much time and money you have to publicize the event, and how many people you want to attract. You have to reach people through methods they'll pay attention to, in language they're comfortable with. If possible, it's best to get the message out many times in different ways, and to reach as many people as possible personally. Methods might include flyers, posters, phone calls, mailings, ads in newspapers and local church and organizational newsletters, public service announcements on local radio and TV, announcements in churches, clubs, and agencies, etc.

Work out the logistics. Logistics are the nuts and bolts of any event, the who and how and when of what gets done. Each demonstration presents its own logistical questions, but some important ones are:

Do you need, how will you pay for, who will be in charge of, and where will you get... A sound system that works? Toilets? Medical facilities and personnel in case of emergency? Parking? Trash disposal? Signs or banners? A way of getting speakers or performers to and from the demonstration and the platform?

How do people in general get to and from the demonstration, and in and out of the space?

How do they get home?

Is there a need for crowd control (i.e. a potential for violence, or for horrendous traffic problems), before during, and/or after the demonstration?

Is clean-up needed? Who cleans up, and how?

What are the plans for meeting with the media before, during and after the event?

Are there plans for post-demonstration activities (constituent meetings with legislators, on-site vaccination of young children, registration for literacy classes, etc.)? If so, how will all this be handled?

Try to think of every possible thing that can go wrong that you haven't already addressed, and figure out what to do about it. Where are you going to get toilets if the ones you ordered aren't delivered? What if there's a counter-demonstration? What if only a few people show up? What if the media doesn't show, or leaves too soon? Anything you can anticipate and plan for is another crisis you don't have to worry about: you'll know what to do.

LEAD TIME

If possible, it is best to allow more than enough time in planning a demonstration to handle all the details and pull everything together. Celebrities or public figures of any kind generally are booked far ahead, and unless (or even if) this is their pet project, they're not going to show up without adequate advance knowledge (at least several months, not several weeks). Sometimes acquiring, or even finding, a space to use can take longer than you'd think possible. Planning how to handle large numbers of people is difficult, and carrying out your planning is even more so (the sound system you need may not be available from the first or second company you talk to; and what do you do when it doesn't appear on the agreed-upon day?)

It's vital to build extra time into your planning if you can. More than enough lead time is usually measured in months, and there's no such thing as too much.

Sometimes, however, a demonstration has to be planned in days, or even hours. The key to planning something successful under any circumstances is to be honest with yourself. What can you really do effectively in the time you have? Don't overreach, and there's a good chance you'll end up with a demonstration that may be modest, but accomplishes your goals. Aim for the moon without adequate time to get there, and you're likely to miss entirely.

COMMUNICATION

Design an effective general communication system. The most important thing you can do when you begin planning a demonstration is, if you don't already have one, to set up an efficient and usable communication system. This system should be available not only for demonstrations and emergencies, but for general use as well among people directly involved in and connected to your issue.

Systems like this prove their worth when there is a need to quickly sway the opinion of legislators. One person, emailing or calling a number of organizations, can, in a matter of hours, generate hundreds, or even thousands, of phone calls and letters to government offices. Fifty letters or calls on an issue is generally considered a large number by legislative staffs. If they get hundreds, that's a groundswell; a thousand or more is a landslide.

The ideal communication system has an individual or small committee as a central coordinator. In the best of all possible worlds, the coordinator would use email, which can reach large numbers of people with a single transmission, for fast and efficient communication. If email isn't available to everyone in the loop, the next best possibility is a phone tree that the coordinator can activate by calling a small number of reliable individuals who then call a number of others who then call others, until everyone on the list has gotten the message. These systems aren't perfect, but they greatly increase the chances that you'll be able to quickly reach everyone you need to. The coordinator should also maintain an up-to-date, computer-based if possible, mailing list from which to do mailings of general interest or importance.

Develop a plan for publicizing the demonstration. The coordinator would be the point person in informing supporters, the desired audience, and the public about the demonstration. Depending upon whom you were trying to reach, the coordinator could make up and assign the distribution of flyers; send out one or more large mailings from the computer list of supporters and relevant organizations; prepare and distribute press releases, news stories, and/or print, radio, and TV ads; post to an email list; activate the phone tree; and facilitate anything else necessary to get the word out. The coordinator doesn't have to do everything himself; but it's important that there be one place where the publicity and communication buck stops.

Orchestrate media coverage of the event. Again, one person--probably either the communications coordinator or an organizer of the demonstration--should oversee media coverage. One good way to guarantee accurate coverage before the event is to write your own stories about it, either as

press releases, or, if you have a good relationship with media representatives, in some other form.

If you haven't already done so, you should begin to cultivate a long-term relationship with the media, so that when you need them--as you do now--they'll respond. Be generous with your time and information when they ask for it, and volunteer information when you can. Position yourself as the "expert" on your particular issue, so that you're the person they'll turn to when they want information about it. Try to establish personal relationships with reporters from different media; they're more likely to be sympathetic to your cause if they know your organization and have some direct contact with the issue.

Make sure that reporters and media outlets know exactly when and where the demonstration will be, and what they're likely to find there. Make organizers, speakers, celebrities, members of the target population, etc. available for comment before, during, and after the event. Think about photo and TV opportunities: if you want pictures or TV coverage, the demonstration has to provide the visual images. Try to make it as easy as possible for media representatives to do their jobs: find them places from which they can see, hear, film, etc. easily; assign a person (perhaps the same person who has coordinated media coverage) to take care of their needs; introduce them to the appropriate people; help them get around. If you want good coverage, then it's up to you to make the event as media-friendly as possible.

Ensure good communication before, during, and after the demonstration. It is vital that organizers be able to communicate with one another, with program participants, and with the crowd while the event is forming, going on, and winding down, especially if it's being held in a large outdoor area. Explaining changes in program, relaying instructions about traffic flow or trash pickup, and contacting individuals in emergencies are only some of the reasons why good communication is essential. Organizers and other key individuals should have cell phones, pagers, or some other means of quick communication with them. It might also make sense, depending on the situation, to appoint a group of "runners," people who can carry messages and run errands while the event is going on. Good communication could mean the difference between a successful demonstration and a disaster.

FOLLOW-UP

Immediate follow-up: Your job isn't done when the demonstration is over. There's making sure the demonstration breaks up in an orderly way, that everything's cleaned up, that people are able to get home. There may be other events scheduled right after the demonstration (visiting legislators, signing up for immunizations, etc.) It might be important to make sure that media representatives get to talk to celebrity participants, members of the target population, and/or demonstration organizers. And there may be organizational or legal issues -- paying suppliers or government permit offices, for instance -- that have to be taken care of before you can call it a day.

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main

Long-term follow-up: The demonstration itself is only a first step toward something. If you don't continue the work you've started, you might as well not have bothered. First, it's important to go over the demonstration with organizers and others who were involved, to assess how things went, and to evaluate the event as a whole. Questions that need to be answered include...

Was the demonstration successful (i.e. did it come off the way you intended, and did it accomplish what you wanted it to)?

It's important to remember that a demonstration is usually only one piece of a larger effort to publicize and/or affect policy on your issue. The law might not change right away; the service might not become available instantly. A successful demonstration may not immediately show obvious results, but it may help to build a foundation for what will happen later. If it runs smoothly and seems to have strong public support, then your organization might be seen as a force that the powers that be need to deal with. You might find yourself invited to meetings you couldn't get into before, and asked for advice by policy makers who formerly ignored you. That's success, too. You may need to wait a while before you can determine exactly how successful your demonstration was.

What went well, and what didn't? How could you do things better in the future?

Who did their jobs well, or particularly well? (You might want to give them more responsibility next time.)

Was a demonstration the right way to get your point across? Should you have used some other method instead?

Would you do it again, and what would you change?

THE NEXT STEP IN LONG-TERM FOLLOW-UP IS TO BUILD ON THE SUCCESS AND MOMENTUM OF THE DEMONSTRATION. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF POSSIBLE WAYS TO DO THIS:

Follow up with the intended audience of the demonstration (legislators, for example) by continuing to bring up the issue, and referring to the demonstration as evidence of support for it.

Follow up with your own constituents (target population, supporters, etc.), using the energy generated by the demonstration to get them involved in keeping the issue before the public.

Publicize your success. Use your contacts with the media to publicize how big and powerful your demonstration was.

Try to get the media to do a series of stories on the issue. If there are celebrities who are willing, they might also be involved in this effort.

Organize other events to address the issue.

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main

Institutionalize the demonstration. Many cities have walks to raise money for hunger, AIDS, or other causes that started out as demonstrations. Now they happen every year, attract thousands of walkers and tens of thousands of sponsors, raise huge amounts of money, and bring the issue to the public in an unavoidable way.

IN SUMMARY

A successful demonstration -- one that accomplishes its goals either immediately or over the long term, and that runs the way organizers envisioned -- depends upon clarity of purpose, getting people there, getting the message to those who need to hear it, and leaving a sense of success and support for the issue with your target audience, your constituents, the public, and the media.

If you consider beforehand whether a demonstration is the right vehicle for you to get your point across, plan it carefully, carry it out well, and follow up diligently, then you should be able to stage a successful public demonstration.

This information was excerpted from The University of Kansas, Section 14.
Organizing Public Demonstrations *Community Tool Box*. 25 Nov. 2019,
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/public-demonstrations/main