

Building Strategic Local Action

The key to successful engagement is creating sustainable activities that will grow in influence and impact over time. The following strategies make the most of your time and capacity, and identify your biggest assets.

Choosing the Right Target and “Ask”

Often, we’re trying to tackle large, complex problems with many stakeholders. But it’s critical to focus on a single “ask”—the one concrete action or solution you will be advocating—and a specific target (the person or persons who can make it happen). Here are three questions to narrow the options:

- What really needs to change? The goal must be concrete, time-bound, and measurable (an existing rule or law—or the need for one, contract, business or government policy, community agreement).
- Where is that change made?
- Who can make the change happen? Multiple people may affect the decision (policymakers, institutional leaders, corporations, community leaders), but consider who has the most authority, who is the most vulnerable/movable, and who you have access to.

Getting to Know Your Target

An exercise known as “powermapping” identifies the levers and relationships you can take advantage of to gain access to and

influence over your target. The key lies in the answers to these questions:

- What is their interest in, and track record on, the issue?
- What do they stand to gain by saying “yes,” or to lose by saying “no”?
- What has prevented them from saying “yes” so far?
- Who directly influences them (opinion leaders, organizations, institutional leaders, local media)?
- Whose support is especially important to them and why?
- Who is most affected by the issue you are trying to address, and how is that community talking about it and acting on it?

Creating Your Action Plan

With an understanding of what might persuade or pressure your target to say “yes” to your ask, you need to develop the activities that will make it happen. Build your strategy around the following questions.

1. **WHO are the people in your network who could carry the message with credibility and perspective?** Consider institutional affiliations, personal connections with the target, prominent constituents, subject experts, compelling personal stories, links with the most affected communities. These are the people to be your messengers, educators, or conveners.



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2. **WHAT are the actions that can show:**

- public opinion leans in a certain direction;
- the benefits of saying “yes” are too good to be denied; and/or
- the consequences of saying “no” are too serious to ignore.

This may seem like straightforward considerations, but they help ground creative brainstorming of activities to ensure they are focused on meeting your goals.

3. **WHERE are the venues that will give you the most visibility or influence?** Consider popular sources of local news in your area, well-attended local events, social media circles, or respected groups or institutions.

- To earn coverage by the local media: letters to the editor/op-eds, pitching story ideas to reporters, editorial board meetings, press conferences
- To keep the issue in public discussions: town hall meetings, hearings, community forums, petitions, demonstrations, letter-writing parties
- To build a relationship with legislators: office-hour visits, invitations to institutional events, educational meetings with staff, public recognition

4. **WHEN is the most opportune time to speak up or take action?**

- When will your target be most likely to listen, or need to make a final decision on the issue?
- When would your target be hoping for a boost in likeability or positive reputation (e.g., ahead of elections, a committee placement, a local event)?
- When will interest in/energy around the issue be at its peak?
- When will the people you hope to engage be most interested or available (e.g., if the issue involves children or teachers, will they be in school or on vacation)?

5. **WHY should people care?** Craft a message that makes it clear what’s at stake for the target, and for the community. Adding relevant data will bring credibility to the issue, but

Ground your data with stories that help elected officials understand what’s at stake for the target, and for the community.

you need to ground the data with stories that help decision-makers see how the problem affects their own lives (and the lives of their constituents) and how the solution will benefit them in ways that matter. Surveys show that policymakers want their constituents’ stories.

6. **HOW can you generate enough support to stay active, build strength, and make this work sustainable?**

- Embrace your strengths. These may include your expertise, experience, unique skills, institutional affiliations, personal networks, work you’ve already done that could be repurposed (e.g., a presentation that could be converted into legislative testimony).
- Share responsibilities with peers. And look for opportunities to partner with existing efforts started by like-minded scientists, national organizations like the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), or community groups (being mindful of how your involvement can support the communities most affected by the problem).
- Take care of yourself. Allow yourself to take breaks, celebrate the work you’re doing, and enjoy the company of your peers and partners—people like to stay involved with people they like.

Learn More

For practical training and guides to support your engagement efforts, sign up for the UCS Science Network at www.ucsusa.org/joinsciencenetwork and check out our Science Advocacy Toolkit at www.ucsusa.org/watchdogtoolkit.