



STRATEGIC THINKING

Level 2: Fundamental activist skills

Published February 2020

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A taste of what lies ahead.

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't signed up to join our movement yet, head over to our [Get Active](#) page.

You can find other modules on fundamental activist skills [here](#). We recommend getting familiar with them all if you are new to activism.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au.



2009 annual general meeting © Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on strategic thinking, the first in a series on how to develop strategies that work. If you are brand new to it, strategy means a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overarching aim. Though this particular module is more of an introduction to strategic thought. It's about how to be more effective when we create that plan of action. It's a fundamental skill for any activist to learn because it connects to everything we do. In this module we'll be covering why it's important to be strategic. We'll also give an overview of what a strategic cycle looks like. Finally we'll show how you can develop your own plans using achievable goals.

If our campaign goal is the destination, then the strategic plan is our road map to get there. It ensures that we are working together toward common outcomes. It's also to make sure we're not using our time and resources on activities that will have little impact. It sets out how we can measure progress, to know whether we are succeeding at these goals or not. We also need to know when plans need to change based on new information. At the heart of any successful plan is the level of strategic thinking that went into it.

What is strategic thinking and why is it important?

Strategic thinking is about asking the questions: Where am I now? Where do I want to go? How am I going to get there?

It's having an awareness of the whole picture and being able to predict different outcomes. It's working out the right course of action based on evidence, probability and experience. It relates to our campaigning when people come together to develop a plan to solve a human rights issue. It could be anything from a multi year global campaign plan to a local plan of action in your local community. It's when we choose activities that are going to have the most success.

When our movement unites behind one strategy we are more powerful and have more impact. That's what happens when we all understand the strategy and our role in implementing it. The risk of not doing this leaves us disorganised and taking action that does not lead to change. We are unable to show power to the decision makers and we are wasting our energy.

But, not knowing how to be strategic in our thinking is almost as bad as not having a strategy at all. We have to take the time to build these skills and learn as we go. For some people this is a natural ability or was developed through other experiences. After all there are many times in our lives where we have had to take a strategic approach.

Have you ever set a personal goal that you were able to achieve? Have you ever had to work out how to fix a difficult situation in your life? If you've done things like this then you've no doubt used some form of strategic thinking in the past. We all have some ability to be strategic, but we all have ways we can improve too.



NSW planning session 2008 © Amnesty International

Here are some common traits of strategic thinkers. Which traits do you do well? Where could you use more development?

A strategic thinker is...

OPEN MINDED	They are able and willing to understand things from all perspectives. That includes how the opposition thinks. They realise how important it is to know what motivates other people and what causes people to act the way they do.
FORWARD THINKING	They look to the future and try to predict what the lay of the land will be like. They take an evidence based approach and try to imagine potential futures. They can work backwards and imagine all the events that happened to get there. They think about how we need to change our long term approach to be successful.
CURIOUS	They are always learning new things, keeping up to date and developing new skills. They know there is always more to know. They analyse how others have approached the same problem, so we don't have to reinvent the wheel all the time.
FLEXIBLE	They don't get attached to particular ideas or plans. They're open to switching to an alternative option if it makes more sense. They adjust and adapt to change well. They move with the times and don't let previous decisions hold them back.
CREATIVE	They are great at brainstorming and coming up with ideas. They are able to think outside the box and embrace the unusual. They value innovation and trying new approaches.
EFFICIENT	They prioritise work based on urgency and impact, not focusing on activities that aren't vital. They streamline the strategy process so more energy goes to the actual delivery.
COURAGEOUS	They know it's okay to take reasonable risks. That we shouldn't always take the safe road because that leads to stagnation and loss of momentum. They encourage a culture of bravery in others.

These are some strategic traits, there are of course others too. On our own we may not tick all these boxes, that's why it's great to create plans with others. Because together we generally bring all of these traits to the table. So don't worry if you're not great at some of them. But don't let that stop you from seeing how far you can push yourself in learning how to do them better either.



Activity: Brainstorm some ideas for how you can nurture and strengthen these traits within yourself. It might seem logical to spend more time on areas where you're least developed, but you should actually do the opposite. Focus on the traits that you are already good at. These are your natural strengths and will be far easier to develop further.



Setting SMART Goals

We have all struggled at various times to achieve personal goals. When this happens we can tell ourselves it's because we're not good enough or we're too lazy. In reality the main reason we might not succeed is because we're not setting the right goals. We've set ourselves up for failure right from the start. There is an art to making goals achievable using the SMART goal process.

This acronym usually stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. You will find different variants of it out there, but they all achieve the same thing. When our goals have taken these criteria into account we increase our odds of succeeding. Let's have a look through each of these and then develop a SMART goal.

Specific:

The goal here is to avoid being too vague or broad. For example, if your goal is "I want to be healthier", what does that mean exactly? How can you make that more specific? Is it about improving your diet or increasing your level of exercise? If that's the case then make those your goals. Think about the who, what, where and how.

Measurable:

This is about adding a quantifiable number to your goal. It's so you know exactly what you are aiming for and you are able to track your progress. For example, "I want to lose weight" may be a specific goal, but it is not measurable. If you changed it to "I want to lose 5 kg" you can measure how you're going.

Achievable:

This is where you've got to be very honest with yourself. How likely is it that you're going to be able to achieve this goal? Is the goal too ambitious? Is it impossible? What if your goal was "I want to save \$10 million dollars"? The goal is specific and measurable. But, for the vast majority of people on the planet it is definitely not achievable. What would a more realistic and achievable version of this look like?

Relevant:

Your goal should match what you actually want to achieve. Is it something you want to commit to? Is it something that will be beneficial or worth doing? What were your motivations for suggesting it in the first place? For example, your goal might be to increase the number of people in your action group or to run larger events. You might have set these goals because you feel like it's something you're supposed to do. But, maybe your group is content with having 3-4 people turn up once a month to write letters. Those growth goals would go against what you currently enjoy about being an activist.

Time-bound:

You need to have a deadline for when you want to achieve your goal. Without this there isn't a lot of pressure or motivation to actually succeed. It becomes a perpetual goal that you can keep putting off for another day. You can also break that timeline up into smaller chunks, so you have mini deadlines. "I will lose 5 kg in the next three months. I will do this by losing 0.5kg per week."

So let's put it all together. A not very SMART goal would be "I want to learn how to play a musical instrument."

To turn that into a SMART goal we would phrase it like the following. "I want to learn how to play my favourite song on an acoustic guitar by the end of the next 6 months. I will do this by taking private lessons once a week and by practicing for at least 15 minutes every evening."

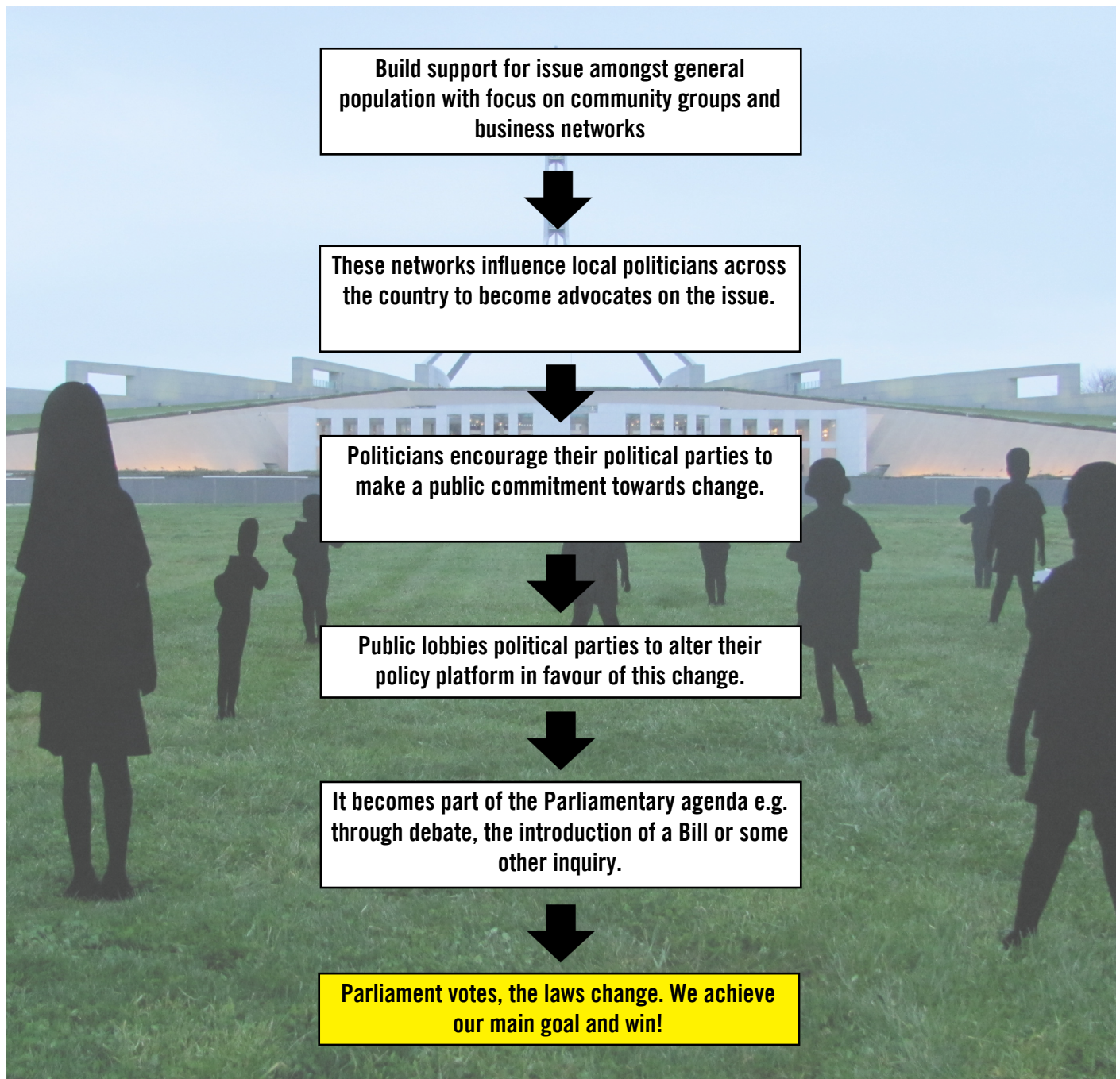


Activity: Create your own SMART goal. It could relate to something in your personal, work or activist life. Make it a very simple, short term goal that you can achieve in the next few weeks. Succeeding at that goal should give you the motivation to attempt something else. If you're finding it too difficult to achieve your SMART goal think about what the barriers are. Were you realistic with it? Did you give yourself enough time to do it? Do you actually want to do it?

Developing a plan

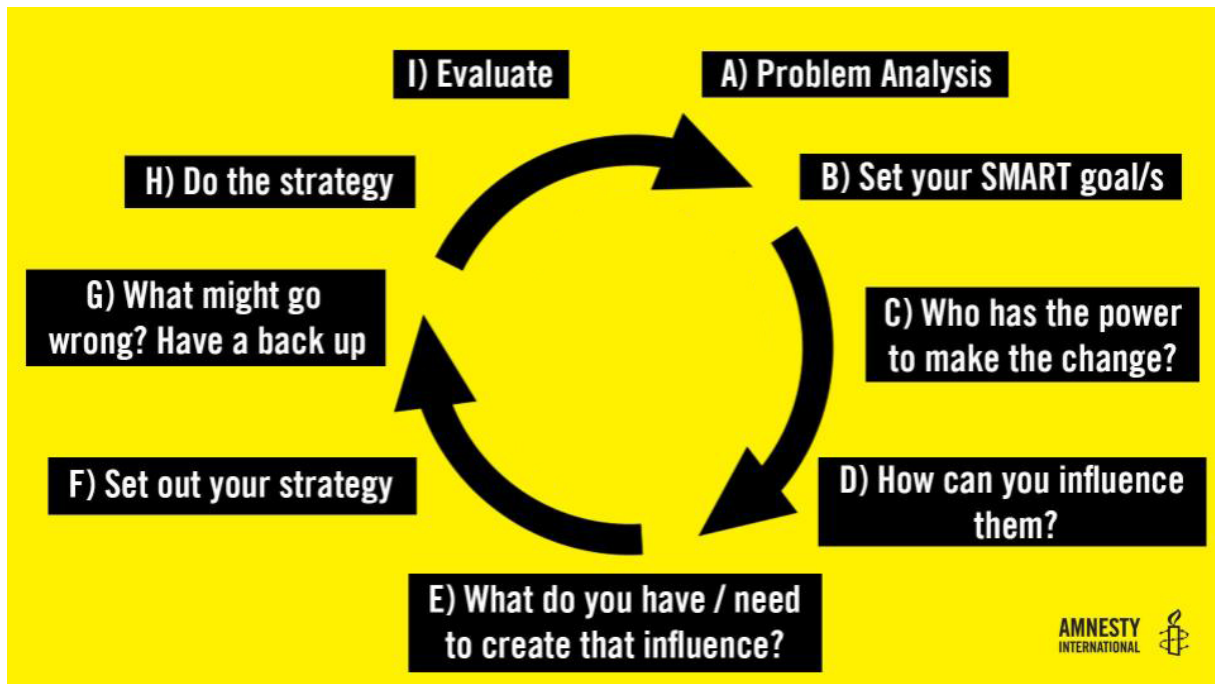
When we have a very complex goal that has a lot of elements to keep track of, we make a plan. It helps us understand where we are and where we want to get to. Long term campaigns generally have one overarching goal and many smaller sub goals. The main goal might be to shift a particular policy to better protect human rights. To reach that stage we would set a path to victory that contains some of the following sub goals. Each one is a mini campaign of their own.

Here's an example of what that could look like.



This is a typical (and simplified) “best case scenario” type of pathway to achieve change. This is what it looks like if everything goes right. But, it’s not going to look the same every time though. It’s definitely not always that easy either. A lot needs to fall into place before we are able to get a victory for human rights. We move from one sub goal to the next as our main focus. If we have all this in a plan we know what all the steps are, who needs to be involved and how much work it will take to win.

In later modules on strategy we will go into more detail about how this all works. But, we wanted to give an overview of the strategy cycle because it's worth having some knowledge about it. You can also use this for any planning needs you have.



The strategy cycle begins with problem analysis. We ask the question, what do we want to change? We turn that into a SMART goal. One which will determine the entire direction of the strategy. Next we do the power analysis. We ask who has the ultimate power to bring about this change and how can we influence them to do it? Usually it is a high ranking politician. For more personal goals that target is likely yourself.

Once we have a good idea about what influence and pressure we need to create, we work out how to do it. It's good to use a variety of pressure points from all directions to increase our odds. The media, the general public, other politicians and the international community. We need all these on our side as much as possible. This is also the point where we have a look at our resources and capacity, are we being realistic? Do we have what we need to achieve this goal. If we're happy with everything we've come up with we then set out our strategy and sub goals.

This is where we'll identify all the things that need to fall into place one after the other. We'll put that into a timeline and figure out when all our activism needs to take place and what it looks like. But, we also need to work out what could go wrong with this strategy. We need to prepare for when things don't go our way. So we

create backup plans or alternative pathways to the final goal. Then we can put the plan into action.

We have to keep analysing and evaluating the progress of the strategy to know whether it is working. If not we can adjust it based on new information and ideas.

You can use this for your own planning needs by developing it on a smaller scale. You can skip past steps C - E as well if they're not relevant for what you are planning. But, following this cycle to create a plan with SMART goals will put you on the path to success.



Activity: Develop a plan of your own. It could be a personal plan of what you want to achieve over a period of time. It could be mapping out your next 3-6 months as an activist. Activities could include things like further development of your activist skills. You could learn more about our current campaigns. How about inspiring people you know to also take action for human rights? Get in touch with us to find out about more options available to you if you're not sure where to go next.

What's next?

That concludes our module on strategic thinking. We hope that it has given you a bit of an overview of what makes a strategic thinker and why it's important. We've also looked at how to set up smarter goals and how to turn them into a plan. In later modules on strategy we'll go a lot deeper into the theory behind developing them. So if that is something that interests you then make sure you check those out on our [Skill Up](#) page. Also make sure to have a look at our other modules on [fundamental activist skills](#) too.

If you have any questions you can get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au. Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

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