

# Building a Group

## I. Introduction:

- A. *Most new coal plants are located in the countryside. The nearest towns are typically small rural communities. More often than not they are relatively poor farming communities. This document is intended to take into account the ways in which taking political action in a rural area is different.*
- B. *Fighting a coal plant is like picking a fight with Goliath. You will be dealing with a corporation that is capable of spending \$1 billion on a plant and which stands to make many millions off of its operation. You will be taking on tasks that you have limited or no experience with. They will have plenty of professional staff who are trained to be competent at those tasks. You will need as much help as you can get.*
- C. *We will talk later about how to grow a strong group and how to get help from outside of your immediate community. First we will look at some general principles that will influence most of what you'll be doing.*

## II. Four general principles and the actions that follow from them:

### A. *Small communities are different.*

1. **Rural communities tend to have an established power structure. Pecking order and reputation are established from childhood.**
  - a) **The first people drawn to your cause will likely be a few folks who live right next to the plant and a number of "outsiders". People who have moved to the country to get away from the city are more likely to see the harms from a coal plant and be less swayed by the economic benefits.**
  - b) **To really make a difference locally, you need to gain allies from inside the established power structure. People whose opinions are respected and who have a history in the community have more influence than a 3 foot stack of scientific studies on the health effects of coal plant pollution.**
  - c) **So, you want to get as many of these influential people on your side as possible. And if you can't win them over, you want to avoid making enemies of them.**
2. **Folks in the country tend to take you at your word until you give them reason not to. We are ill-suited to defend against the sophisticated marketing campaign of the coal companies. They are selling their coal plant to us with carefully chosen words that make the project sound as good as possible without telling outright**

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lies. To find the truth in what they say you have to go over it with a fine tooth comb and questioned every assumption and every implication. Plain spoken country people are not in the habit of doing this.

a) So, at every step in the process you want to be educating your neighbors about what the whole truth is.

b) It is useful to point out every misrepresentation.

(1) *In general, it is not helpful to demonize the Corporation. The corporate representatives that people will meet are perfectly decent people. It is just that they work for a complicated but simpleminded beast which, like a deer in rut, chases only one thing to the exclusion of all else -- profit.*

(2) *By continuously highlighting specific examples of where the Corporation said one thing but documented evidence shows something different, you gradually build up the case that they are speaking in partial truths.*

### B. ***What convinces people***

1. **Repetition -- psychological studies show that the more times a person is exposed to a given piece of information, the more likely they are to believe it.**

a) **The purpose of political action is to influence people. You will be trying to influence neighbors to join with you to participate in fighting the coal plant, influencing the broader community to believe that the overall harm from the coal plant is more detrimental than the economic benefits that will come from it, influencing elected officials in your area to oppose the plant or at least to withdraw their support, and influencing State and Federal elected representatives.**

b) **Put your message in front of those you hope to influence over and over and over and over again. Everyone needs to hear the whole story once, but after that, any contact that reminds them you're**

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still there and the problem is still there will help win them over. Here are some examples:

- (1) *One group had three members volunteer to pay for a very small ad in their local paper every week. The ad had the same header every week "Coal Hard Facts" followed by a brief factoid like "the Valley plant will emit more smog forming nitrogen oxides than 50,000 automobiles" or " A new EPA report measuring the health risks posed by disposal practices at coal ash dumps confirms what residents who live nearby know only too well – pollution from these sites significantly increases both cancer and noncancer health risks and degrades water quality in groundwater supplies."*
  - (2) *One group maintained an e-mail list called "influence" which went to all the elected officials and local media. Whenever they came across a relevant study or news article they would send an e-mail to the list with a one or two paragraph summary and a link to the original document.*
- c) **Sometimes you can get more effect from a whole lot of BBs than you can from a rifle.**
2. **The Source -- if the source of information is held in high esteem or respected that information is much more likely to be believed.**
- a) **This relates back to what was said previously about finding allies in your community whose opinion is respected. Taking these folks along to go talk with your mayor or other elected officials can dramatically improve the chances of getting the results you want.**
  - b) **In some communities the Sierra Club is considered a bunch of flaky environmental crazies. On the other hand the Audubon Society, National Wildlife Fund, Ducks Unlimited, and other conservation groups are held in higher esteem. It is often**

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possible to find the same information that you might find on the Sierra Club's website on the webpage of one of these groups. "According to The Audubon Society" is more believable to some folks than "According to the Sierra Club"

- c) **A lot of people in the country have a strong Christian faith. At this point, a number of faith oriented groups are taking strong stands on environmental issues. Many people will take the message to heart easier when presented as "Creation Care".**
  - d) **Two Republican governors, Schwarzenegger of California and a Krist of Florida have come out strongly against coal. Some folks will hear the message better through their words.**
  - e) **The idea here is to utilize diverse sources for the information you're disseminating and where possible try to match the sources with the audience.**
3. **Intensity -- things we learn in extremely intense situations often become very deeply held beliefs.**
- a) **As a practical matter I suppose you could hit someone with a baseball bat and then scream "coal plants are bad". I'm sure they would remember what you said, but this may not be the best way to create intensity.**
  - b) **On the other hand, we all have deeply held values about nature, our family's health, and the quality of our children's lives. If you talk about your own personal heartfelt feelings about these things before you even mention anything about coal plants there is a good chance you will access some intense feelings in the person you're talking to. Then you can talk about coal plants and pollution and you can relate your concerns about the plant**

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to your deeply held feelings about nature, health, and your children.

### **C. *People Are Busy***

- 1. Whether you're talking to your state legislator or your next-door neighbor, they are only going to give you so much time to pique their curiosity, present your argument, and ask for what you want.**
- 2. Do the obvious things. Be prompt. Be considerate. Be as brief as you can be. Do what you say you're going to do.**
- 3. The issues around coal plants are complex and detailed. The science will support your argument, but it is difficult to talk about complex studies and explain the details of pollution effects or the permitting process without putting your audience in a mild coma.**
- 4. Whether it's in a press release, a newspaper ad, or talking to an elected official, it's best to do what the mother bird does when feeding her chicks -- partially digest the food. If you do your homework, and we will point you to some resources that will help, you can distill the argument down to a series of short clear sentences and paragraphs that make the case briefly but clearly.**
- 5. Don't expect that anyone is going to read a 25 page scientific study let alone seven or eight of them. Distill the main point of the study down to two or three sentences or use a very brief direct quote. But always reference the study itself with a footnote, a hot link, or the title. That way if anyone wants to verify what you're saying, they can.**