

Stages of escalation in a nonviolent campaign

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When we develop and carry out a nonviolent campaign for social change, we need to consider steps for increasing the pressure on those whose actions or decisions we oppose.

Ebert's model of Escalation

There are lots of ways a movement can escalate a conflict while remaining nonviolent. Intuitively, most activists know this, but there is very little in the literature about it, but one model was created by the German peace researcher Theodor Ebert in the 1960s, and described in his book *Gewaltfreier Aufstand (Nonviolent Uprising – Alternatives to Civil War)*. He distinguishes three steps of escalation, matching each step of confrontational action with constructive action.

In Ebert's model, the **first stage** of a nonviolent campaign emphasises bringing an issue into the public sphere. A well-organised campaign will use public protest actions and present alternatives (constructive action), to draw attention to the issues and encourage change. If this does not achieve the desired result, the campaign may move to 'stage two'.

In the **second stage**, the campaign increases public pressure by staging legal forms of non-cooperation (strikes, consumer boycotts, slow-downs) as well as innovative lawful activities (fair trade initiatives, alternative economy structures, nonviolent intervention). The goal at this stage is to 'raise the stakes' (societal costs) while minimising the 'rewards' for those committing or benefiting from injustice. At the same time, the campaign will most likely continue its actions from the first stage. This may be sufficient for a movement to achieve its objective. However, if not, campaign organisers have the possibility of using nonviolent actions that requires greater risk from the activists and present a much more powerful statement to the public.

The **third stage** of escalation uses nonviolent civil disobedience as both a protest and as a form of civil usurpation. In stage three, activists carry out actions that exercise authority or implement a structure, without a legal right to do so. Examples of this might be:

- providing sanctuary to prevent the deportation of refugees,
- nonviolent intervention,
- reverse strikes,
- building an environmentally sound village on the construction site of an environmentally destructive factory.

Nonviolence

What is nonviolence, and why use it?
Conflict

Strategy

Movement action plan
Mobilising for change: building power in Nepal

Nonviolent actions

Maintaining nonviolence during an action
Tactic star
Dilemma actions

Case studies

Castor – how we mobilised people for civil disobedience
Freedom Flotilla to Gaza – a dilemma action case study

Training

Hassle lines
Spectrum of allies
Pillars of power

As nonviolent campaigns develop, they can escalate from one stage to the next, as well as continuing to use actions from previous stages. This does not imply that there is an inflexible, linear escalation, but it is useful to consider the interrelationship of these stages and types of actions. A campaign may consciously decide to move from one stage to another (up or down) as it chooses the most effective actions for the context in which the movement finds itself. Throughout a campaign, it is important to make the effort to engage in dialogue with one's adversaries, trying to find solutions that include all parties. At certain times, for example, this dialogue may start more easily if the campaign temporarily reduces its public pressure. A campaign may also decide that is more effective to increase its work on constructive action and to hold back on confrontational actions, or vice versa.

Other means of escalation

Of course, there are more ways to escalate a campaign than increasing the level of non-cooperation or developing constructive alternatives. Perhaps the most common are escalation through increasing numbers of participants, increased length of public protests (think of people occupying a public square to protest against a repressive regime for many weeks) or a wider variety of participants. In particular, if protesters are joined by people from the ranks of the elite members of institutions at the core of the state (police, military, civil servants) – the weight of their protest increases. These latter forms of escalation have been noted in studies on civil resistance campaigns which aimed to overthrow regimes.

Power and conflict

Nonviolent campaigns usually seek to change the behaviour of governments or government agencies. More rarely, other civil society actors are the focus of a campaign. When a government is the target, the issue is the power relations between the protesters and those who rule. Escalating nonviolent action through increasing levels of withdrawal of consent and cooperation, civil disobedience, increasing levels of participation in the campaign, or by inducing a split within the elites itself on the issue at stake – changes these power relations. In particular, carrying dissent into the ranks of the ruling political group, the police, or the military has turned out to be of vital importance in a wide variety of campaigns.

More difficult are those campaigns where the opponent is not the government but other, non-state or civil society, groups. We sometimes see opponents and supporters of a government or regime clashing in the street – for example, in Egypt after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, between supporters and opponents of the government. Very often these conflicts – if they do not become violent as is often the case – are 'resolved' by one group winning public opinion, leaving all but the most hard-core members aware that their opinions are not considered acceptable. This often leaves the 'losing' group socially ostracised. But while they may often 'disappear' for a time, they often 'reappear' again in the

future because there was no true change of attitudes but only the suppression of them being expressed publicly.

Carrying out a successful campaign requires an ongoing evaluation of the campaign's activities and their effectiveness. Ideally, at the beginning of a campaign, a strategic plan is made, where different options and steps are identified. Such analysis should include the question; "How can we escalate the conflict if we are not heard?" For effective strategic planning, it is critical that this is not a one-time analysis, but that there are frequent checks and re-analysis of where you stand. Your group can use the framework of Ebert's chart to track a campaign's implementation of constructive as well as confrontational actions over time to evaluate how they work together to achieve your goals.

Stages of escalation in a nonviolent campaign

| Stage of Escalation | Confrontational action (actions that are directed against injustice in society) | Constructive action (actions that help to construct a just order in society) | How it works |
|--|--|---|--|
| Stage 1 Bring the issue into the public arena | Protest (demonstrations, petitions, leaflets, vigils) | Presenting alternatives (teach-in lectures, show alternatives) | Publicising to convince |
| Stage 2 Legal actions that deal with the issue | Legal non-cooperation (strikes, consumer boycotts, go slows) | Legal innovative activities (fair trade, free schools, alternative economic activity, ethical investments, nonviolent intervention) | Raising the stakes (costs) and minimising the rewards for those committing injustice |
| Stage 3 Illegal actions that deal with the issue | Civil disobedience (sit-ins, blockades, tax resistance, strikes, war resistance) | Civil usurpation (sanctuary movements, pirate radio, reverse strikes, nonviolent intervention) | Redirecting power away from power-holders |

Table adapted and translated from German into English by Eric Bachman. This is a direct translation of the Chart of escalation of nonviolent actions on page 37 of Gewaltfreier Aufstand – Alternative zum Bürgerkrieg, Theodor Elbert (1978).

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