

Pushing the Buttons

During the 60's, I developed tactics that enabled politicians to feel so uncomfortable they would frequently reverse themselves in order to accommodate newly discovered realities. Or, in the case of corporations, the long-sought-after meeting, which had always been denied – “We are not involved” – suddenly became possible and even a priority.

I attribute the development of this tactical sixth sense to my love of high school geometry. I poured over geometric relationships seeking the size of angles, the length of the sides of rectangles or triangles, etc. I would carry these problems with me for days at a time. I massaged the different variables during my daily shower period, during the silent evening meal, during my twilight sleep zone, and then picked them up again at the 6 a.m. morning bell. I exhausted all the options and possibilities within my power, and when I finally found the correct relationship, the answer would bring an afterglow of satisfaction.

I gradually came to realize that decision-making is a matter of understanding and laying out one's options. I used this approach when I counseled high school seniors. First, I helped them articulate the predicament with which they were struggling, and second, I explored with them the various decisions that could be made to deal with it. Even when life's decisions, big or small, are seen as unpleasant or unpalatable or cannot yet be faced for fear of the unknown, it can be a reassuring and freeing experience to realize there is a way forward. One is not paralyzed.

From time to time, I see a woman, now 70 years old, who left her husband 30 years ago because, she said, I was the first person to explain to her that her previously held position – not to decide – was truly a decision. So if in reality she made the decision not to decide, then she was free enough and capable of making another decision, that is, to decide. Non-action is as much of a decision as action.

Whether my love of geometric relationships gave rise to my tactical sense of how to manipulate politicians and organizations is probably beside the point. The fact is, I have demonstrated many times over the years my ability to bring about maximum pressure because I can find the correct buttons to push.

I remember the case of the liberal state senator who refused our request to publicly call for an investigation of the misuse of police power against striking farmworkers. In our view, his public statement was deemed essential because if he spoke out publicly, it would be taken seriously by the media, but if we, a ragtag group of activists, raised the issue, it would be considered self-serving and easily ignored. I pleaded with him. He said no. His office said no. He made it very clear that he had helped us on many occasions, but this time it was final, his answer was no. And stop bothering me.

I asked five people, farmworker staff and supporters, some of whom spoke only a few words of English, to visit his Los Angeles office and wait there until he agreed to meet with them. I knew, of course, that state senators are rarely in their district offices because their daily work keeps them in the state capital. They only return to their district for speech-making and ribbon-cutting events. I instructed the volunteers to carry with them thermos bottles, blankets or sleeping bags, and a picnic cooler filled with food and drink. They were not to agree to any meeting with an aide or office receptionist; they would say instead that they would wait until the senator had time to meet with them. Less than two hours later, I received a call from the senator's office in Sacramento asking me what it was I wanted the senator to do. I spelled out the items I thought should be in a press release, and I stressed how important it was to raise the issue in the media. Less than an hour later, I heard the senator quoted extensively on the two Los Angeles 24-hour radio news stations. He spoke forcefully, he said it was vitally important that government agencies investigate these allegations raised by the striking farmworkers, and he himself would be monitoring the situation, etc. He could not have been more helpful. I ask myself, how could this brief, nondescript "sit-in" bring a powerful senator to reverse himself and come out swinging for the rights of farmworkers when he had sworn he would not do so? It must be the geometry of the situation that changed the relationship.

In the early 70's, as a result of an off-the-record conversation I had with the president of Chiquita Banana at a meeting arranged by the produce buyer for Mayfair Markets, the United Fruit Company became so concerned about whether I could prevent their off-shore banana boats from being unloaded in California ports, they flew two senior labor negotiators from Boston to meet with me as the first step in opening labor negotiations affecting their produce

operations in the Salinas Valley. Farmworker union contracts followed soon after.

In 1968, Marshall Ganz and I were able to transform the five floors of the Kern County courthouse into a hushed, reverent, and cathedral-like atmosphere by lining all the corridors of the building with thousands of praying farmworkers, men, women and children. Cesar Chavez, our founder and leader, who was in the middle of his public fast for nonviolence, had been hauled into Superior Court to answer allegations made by the growers about union violence. The presiding judge rejected the growers' attorney's argument that the courthouse building be cleared because the presence of thousands of farmworkers would certainly intimidate the court. The judge then ordered the hearing to be continued after Cesar had finished and recovered from his fast.

There are buttons to push in every politician or organization, public or private, in order to bring proper attention to the issue at hand. The tactical problem is to uncover the whereabouts of these buttons and to push them effectively. One must examine and understand relationships that already exist in order to connect with the persons who have the power to make decisions. These decisions will rarely be made out of compassion or concern, but primarily out of self-interest.

Pushing the buttons is not much different, it seems to me, from understanding geometric relationships in order to find the answers to the questions at the end of the chapter.