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## WE HAVE LEARNED SOME RULES FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION\*

JOHN W. GARDNER  
*Chairman, Common Cause*

When Common Cause was first launched, we were peppered with questions about how a citizens' movement would function. How would we accomplish change? How could we cope with vested interests? Where would we acquire clout? After one year of operation, we have some of the answers.

### EIGHT BASIC RULES

The first basic rule we have learned is that an effective instrument of citizen action must be a full-time, continuing effort. One of the basic failings of citizen effort is the unpredictable waxing and waning of enthusiasm. The forces of social change are powerful and deeply rooted. To have any impact on them requires sustained effort. That is why Common Cause is still working for withdrawal from Vietnam while others have given up in despair.

The second rule is to limit the number of targets and hit them hard. In Common Cause we guard against aimless dissipation of energy by fighting specific battles on specific battlegrounds — and we do nothing else. We don't take positions just to declare ourselves; we don't carry on education for the sake of education. But if an organization takes on only those battles which it intends to fight through to a conclusion, it must limit sharply the number of issues it tackles. Accomplishing significant change requires a massing of energy and resources. Citizen's energy scattered enthusiastically in all directions changes nothing.

A third rule is to put a professional cutting edge on citizen enthusiasm. A weakness of citizen action is the disinclination to get a professional grasp on the processes of government. Well-meaning citizens can't be bothered with the grimy machinery by which the public business gets done. The highminded citizen feels so noble just "fighting the good fight" that he finds rewards even in defeat. High-mindedness is no substitute for professional skill in doing battle.

A fourth rule is to form alliances. Citizen concern often expresses itself through innumerable channels. There is no end to the list of citizen groups. But multitudinous efforts are of little value unless groups make up their minds to work together. The most effective alliances occur when groups of similar purpose set up ad hoc arrangements to work together on a specific battle. The potential force of such collaboration is impressive: given an appropriate issue, it is

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possible to gather into one room on a week's notice a dozen people from organizations representing tens of millions of Americans.

A fifth rule is "tell the story." Effective communication is the most powerful single weapon of the public interest lobby. The special interest lobby usually works behind closed doors. The light of day has a marvelously healthy effect on politicians. The problem and solution must become the subject of public discussion. Necessary information must be conveyed to the public. The story must be told in the mass media. Citizens must write to their local newspapers about it, discuss it in their church, union, business or fraternal groups, talk to their friends about it. The issues must be dramatized. If the public is apathetic, it must be aroused. If there is already public indignation, it must be channeled.

The sixth rule: the citizens' organization should treat its membership as a group of dedicated workers, not as a "bloc" in the electoral sense. The goal is not vast numbers but an active membership that multiplies its effectiveness by reaching out into the community.

The seventh rule: a citizens' movement should make the most of allies within the institution it is trying to affect. Many public officials want very much to improve the institutions in which they find themselves and welcome the helping hand of a strong citizens' movement. We have found this is true in Congress and in the executive agencies as well.

The eighth rule is to organize for action. It sounds so obvious. But it so often doesn't happen. Many groups talk of action but are essentially organized for study, discussion or education. Still others keep members busy with organization housekeeping, ego-gratifying committee chores, internal politics and passing of resolutions.

#### INDEPENDENT-MINDED MEMBERS

In addition to these rules of operation, we have learned much about our members during the first year. As we suspected, you are independent-minded people with strong views. Your many letters contain extensive advice on how to run Common Cause and much thoughtful comment on issues. Though you differ markedly among yourselves on priority issues, you do not object to action on items which you consider of low priority. Very few have urged deletion of any agenda item.

We also have learned that the vast majority of members approve of the specific issues we have tackled. This was crucial because many of our critics said we could get agreement on broadly stated issues, but we would split the organization wide open over specific battles. This hasn't happened. Very few members (less than one-tenth of one percent) have resigned because they disagreed with one or another position we have taken.