



Duncan Green

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## Strategy v Tactics

*Duncan Green picks out **Marshall Ganz**'s introduction to strategy as a particular highlight of his new book*

This was the chapter in *People, Power and Change* (which I **reviewed last week**) that most hit home with me. Lots of overlap with what we are teaching at the LSE, but many new insights too. An extended extract should give you the idea.



Ganz's starting point is that activists need to think hard about strategy because when it comes to changing the world, it's not enough to have virtue on your side: 'just as might doesn't make right, right doesn't make might'.

## What Is Strategy?

"Strategy is how you turn what you have into what you need to get what you want. We all know how to do this. If you have ever overslept, missed your bus, and needed to get to work or school on time, you crafted a plan B or a work-around. Whether you called a Lyft, borrowed a bike, called on a friend with a car, or something else, you were strategizing—figuring out how to turn the resources you had into the power, or capacity, you needed to get what you want.

Like storytelling, we strategize every day. We are purposeful creatures who come up with plans for the next few minutes, the next hour, the next day, and the next year. Because the world is a

contingent place, a place of continual change, some intended, some not, some random, some not, reality often disrupts our plans. It's not that the plan was bad (unless it didn't allow for change), but the future is uncertain. So implicitly, if not explicitly, we learn to strategize throughout our lives.

The word "strategy" comes from the Greek *stratos*—the word for army based on *strateo*, spreading out, like on a field of battle—and *agein*—the word for leading. The general was called *strategos*, an army leader. The strategos would go to the top of a hill and evaluate the resources on both sides; reflect on opportunities and constraints imposed by the battlefield, the time of day, the strengths and limitations of his own troops and those of his opponent; and consider how to deploy his troops in ways most likely to achieve victory. The strategos needed a good overview of the field, as well as intimate knowledge of each army's capacities, and details of the streams, bridges, forests, trees, and overall terrain. Another way to describe what the strategos does is to hypothesize a theory of change: how to get from here, a moment of uncertainty, to where we need to be, which is winning.



The soldiers down on the field were described as *taktikos*, skilled in the art of arrangement, putting things in order, or deployment. They were the ones who had to translate the theory of the strategos

into action. Tactics are the specific actions through which strategy is embodied and enacted. An activity, from shooting an arrow to hosting a house meeting, to organizing a rally, is not a tactic unless it is strategic: implementing and at the same time testing a theory of change. Launching a petition, for example, or any action done because “that’s what we always do” is not a tactic because it is not strategic. When people describe recent mobilizations as tactics in search of a strategy, they are describing habitual or reactive activities uninformed by any theory of change.

Strategy is not big or tactics, small. They are different. We strategize to develop a hypothesis about how we could use our resources to achieve valued change: a “theory of change.” A theory of change, in turn, can guide our choices about targeting, timing, and tactics. On what do we focus, targeting deployment of our resources to get the most leverage: a strategic goal? How can we harmonize the temporal rhythm of our campaign with that of the world around us, as well as our personal rhythms? When do we start, when do we stop, do we go fast or slow, short term or long term? How do we deploy tactics to implement our theory of change and, at the same time, test it, adapt it, or even change it based on new learning?

Strategizing is also highly contextualized in a unique way. It requires seeing trees and forest at the same time. The strategos on the hilltop has a great overview. The taktikos in the valley has an intimate view of the field of battle. The problem is when a fog may settle between the hilltop and the valley. The strategos imagines he knows the whole truth. The taktikos imagines that he knows the whole truth. Strategizing requires both truths—intimate knowledge of the context along with a capacity to put the context in context.



*Strategy without tactics is just a bunch of nice ideas, and tactics without strategy are a waste of resources*



## Learning to Strategize



Having learned the importance of strategy, my real training in strategic craft began in the **United Farm Workers**. One of **Cesar Chavez's** real gifts—rooted in the street smarts that came with needing to do a lot with a little—was his ability to strategize. I was in awe of it. But this gift only became a strength of the UFW because Cesar shared it, engaged others in it, and challenged others to learn it. So, the UFW became a venue in which many of us learned to strategize. Cesar blended his street smarts with study of the lives of the saints, ten years of organizing with Fred Ross and Saul Alinsky, Gandhi's teachings evident in the civil rights movement, a mastery of cultural resources, and a commitment to constant adaptive learning.”

## Strategy v Tactics

Ganz then sets out five criteria for choosing tactics:

1. Make the most of your own resources
2. Operate with the experience of your constituency, and outside of that of your opponent
3. Unify your constituency, while dividing your opposition
4. Be consistent with your values
5. Tactics must be fun, motivational and simple.

And concludes “Strategy without tactics is just a bunch of nice ideas, and tactics without strategy are a waste of resources.”

Wonderful.

### About the author

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