

## **Apocalypse No! Action Planning our way to Progressive Prosperity**

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Benno Friedman has challenged us once again to get real and think big in an era when many feel that a dystopian future is imminent, if not already upon us, given the tragic facts and trend lines that mark the poor health of human populations, the global environment and basic democracy, and the concurrent rise of income inequality and corporate power.

Benno posed this challenging set of questions from Cloud Mountain earlier this year:

“The scale runs between suicidal-infused hopelessness and Pollyannic euphoria. Speaking both to the specifics of your mission and the macro global prognosis, where on the scale do you place yourself organizationally and why? Is it enough to be an optimistic existentialist as one watches a train wreck from inside the train? What alternative, if any, have you come up with? Please be as concrete as possible: pretend your response is to be read by a jury of your peers.”

Before answering the question about where I am on such a scale of hopefulness, let me review our mission and share my analysis about how I think about our work in the larger context of the challenges that Benno rightly cites.

The Environmental Health Strategy Center (and our c4 partner, Prevent Harm) promotes human health and safer chemicals in a sustainable economy. We exist because people are sick, disabled and dying early from a materials economy that runs on toxic chemicals, fossil carbon and resource depletion. Our basic goal: to alter the system of chemical production, use and disposable so that it's no longer a source of harm to people and the planet.

Founded in 2002, with roots that run back some 35 years, the Environmental Health Strategy Center has successfully moved the needle already, for example, by:

- \* passing far-reaching state policies to disclose and restrict the use of toxic chemicals in children's products and consumer goods, e.g. couches, computers and televisions;
- \* co-leading a national campaign to fix our broken federal chemical safety system through the first Congressional overhaul of the Toxic Substances Control Act in 40 years;
- \* persuading The Home Depot to end its sale of flooring containing hormone-disrupting chemicals (known as phthalates) by the end of 2015, which will flip the market globally.

Examining our mission, or that of any social change organization, reminds us that our most basic goals are not truly achievable. They are aspirational and directional. Healthy people, safe chemicals and products, a sustainable economy – we aim to move society far forward in the direction of that vision. But like world peace or economic justice, there's no sharp defining point at which these goals are actually fully achieved. There's a similar notion behind the saying that “sustainability is not a destination but rather a journey”

(notwithstanding its sometimes clichéd use to excuse vague corporate progress).

If goals, by definition, are not achievable, then we must examine whether our specific long-term objectives are winnable, and how they measure up against the changes needed, before we weigh judgment on the scale of hopefulness. Arguably, the more important question is whether we have the winning strategies, right organizing vehicles and the right resources at the right time, to leverage timely and substantial change that makes a lasting difference.

The answer to that question rests first on an accurate analysis of the existing conditions, i.e. the status and trends of the major factors that combine to open or close strategic change opportunities or raise or lower barriers and other threats to dramatic social progress.

**EXISTING CONDITIONS.** Let's briefly review some with a balanced eye and open mind.

**Yes, many of the trend lines are horrible.** Benno is right, of course. Carbon dioxide levels and climate impacts are still on the rise. We're on the verge of the next great species extinction. Income equality and concentrated corporate power are the highest in perhaps 100 years. Environmental health disparities remain unjustly rampant, affecting people of color disproportionately. For the first time, death rates have risen for white, high school educated middle class men, a result of economic insecurity. The middle class has been decimated by the decline in U.S. manufacturing and real incomes since the mid-1970s. U.S. leadership in health and safety regulation has been abandoned since the late 1970s, ceded to Europe. Unchecked corporate money floods the electoral and legislative process. The American empire has likely peaked. These indicators seem to be byproducts of the flawed dominant military-industrial complex as well as symptoms of the system unraveling.

**Yet, a rising wave of populist discontent portends change.** From the occupy movement to the Tea Party, from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump, from the living wage campaigns to the border militia, there's a populist angst and energy on both the left and right of the political spectrum. The polls reflect a broad base of discontent and economic insecurity. Historically, these conditions breed change, some times organized, often chaotic.

**Rising consumer awareness about health, environmental and economic injustice.** American consumers demonstrate a growing concern about the impacts that their purchases have on the health and well being of their families, the environment and workers. While hardly a universal shift, this is backed by consumer trends and polling.

**Social tolerance grows, even amidst reactionary backlash.** Witness that same-sex marriage is the law of the land, the weakening prohibition on marijuana, and the view of opiate addiction as an epidemic disease rather than a crime. Even as racist violence and immigrant bashing seems unabated, witness the rise of Black Lives Matter and the political convergence around reforming the criminal justice system. Youth are increasingly more tolerant than their elders, reflecting real a cultural change in attitudes.

**More information is available to more people than ever before.** There's unparalleled democratic access and crowd sourcing of news, opinion and data then ever in history.

Granted, there's undue corporate influence and lots of junk info out there. But social media and the blogosphere have enabled a level of shaping of public opinion and advocacy communications previously beyond the reach and budget of most organizers.

**Sustainability has mainstreamed.** While the ultimate meaning of the word remains contested terrain, there's no denying the rise of the triple-bottom line and the integration of social, environmental and economic concerns and progress reporting by corporations, academia, government and other organizations. Sustainable development, the sustainability of products, sustainable cities - the rhetoric and forward movement abounds.

**LESSONS LEARNED.** Our reading of history should inform our analysis of the conditions:

**We need a long view.** I remember spending a day with my young daughters at the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, NY. The story of the brilliant organizing of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony, Sojourner Truth and others inspired me. But what really blew me away was the staying power of the campaign. They planned and ran a 70-year winning campaign to secure the right of women to vote. Seventy years! I'm not saying it shouldn't have happened sooner or that the struggle for equal rights for women ended in 1920, hardly. But rather that the perseverance and inter-generational organizing was amazingly successful. We need a long view toward social change even in the face of irreversible damages and catastrophic stakes.

**Certain periods in history enable greater social change.** We need to be optimally positioned to take advantage of those times of great social upheaval and social progress. I came of age in the tail end of the late 60s-early 70s when dramatic progress was being achieved. The social reformers of the 1900s and 1930s made similar great gains. They were ready with winning strategies and campaigns when the conditions were ripest for the biggest gains. We need to be ready too. We may be entering such a period once again.

**Unpredictable events catalyze openings for change.** Uproar over Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* led to massive food industry safety reforms. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 similarly spawned pesticide regulation. The Love Canal toxic waste disaster of 1978 spurred passage of the Superfund legislation (signed by Ronald Reagan!) to make polluters pay to clean up their toxic mess. The Bhopal chemical disaster that killed thousands in India leveraged a grassroots right to know movement in the United States into a major federal chemical policy in 1986. Even the 9/11 tragedy catalyzed a major response, albeit a right-wing shift to a permanent state of war in the Mideast.

**The geography of change varies over time.** Southern organizing led the drive for civil rights in the 1950s, well in advance of change in the racist north. The Right to Know movement about dangerous chemicals started in workplaces in the East and spread wildly at the municipal level especially in California before spurring state and federal reform across the nation. In the 1970s, an unprecedented wave of far-reaching environmental and health & safety policy became federal law, setting a minimum floor of protection for all. We have to be ready to make change wherever the conditions and strategies most enable it.

**BASIC STRATEGIES.** After carefully considering the lessons of those who struggled before us, what are the best strategies at the macro level for navigating around and leveraging the specific conditions that we face at this point in time? What's the best general approach to winning? Perhaps these four approaches make the most sense though there will be others:

**1. Promote radical transparency and full disclosure of information.** Daniel Goleman, author of *Ecological Intelligence* defines radical transparency as the coming "sea change of information" that's empowering buyers with data on the social and environmental costs of everyday products. Many "right to know" tactics, such as forcing disclosure of toxic chemicals uses in products, are building on this strategy to feedback change in the system.

**2. Drive a progressive wedge to divide the opposition to public policy reform.** We can wrestle bipartisan control of government from corporate interests by advancing public policy agendas that divide the right wing coalition and threaten the loss of elections for voting the wrong way way. Protecting children's health from toxic chemicals is a potent progressive wedge issue, for example, that we've used to score bipartisan policy wins.

**3. Run corporate campaigns that leverage private sector reforms.** Corporate decision makers are susceptible to organized pressure applied to strategic points of leverage: customer discontent, brand sensitivity, reputational value, financial liability, etc. It doesn't matter how much corporations control government if we can threaten customer demand. Recently, for example, we convinced The Home Depot to end its use of toxic chemicals because they didn't want customers to know they were selling toxic products.

**4. Integrate health, environment, justice and economy demands in all our work.** We need to build collective power and achieve synergy with limited resources. If we can build integrated programs and run campaigns that deliver on multiple values simultaneously, we should be able to organize more people, partners and funders to leverage change. In Maine, for example, we're advocating use of renewable biomass from sustainably harvested forests to make biobased materials that replace fossil carbon in plastics. Local production will create jobs in depressed rural economies while producing healthier biobased products.

**LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES.** Just as our basic strategies should navigate the existing conditions, our real measure of success should apply those strategies to achieve specific long-term results. For the Environmental Health Strategy Center, for example, we have a long-term objective to:

Drive high priority chemicals out of the most vulnerable chemical markets in the United States within ten years in favor of safer alternatives.

Winning the women's right to vote was another long-term objective. These should still be SMART objectives: specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-scaled. Setting forth ambitious long-term objectives, based on winning strategies and strategic analysis, marks progress against a scale of real substantial progress rather than more fickle hope.

**ORGANIZING VEHICLES.** Depending on our long-term objectives, different kinds of organized activity are better suited to carry the work forward. Creating and adapting the right organizing vehicles are dictated by the strategic needs and opportunities.

For us, we concluded that we needed a new organizing vehicle, namely a national market campaign that targets the most vulnerable chemical markets of corporations that can be forced to switch to safer alternatives to toxic chemicals out of fear of losing customers.

**SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES.** Once we're clear on the most winnable long-term objectives, then short-term campaigns can be designed to win incremental progress. That's OK, because we're building power and energizing our supporters to steadily advance the case down a strategic pathway toward larger lasting change. Incremental change is hardly milquetoast reform when it's another domino falling in a calculated cascade that leads to radical change. But our short-term objectives have to make larger strategic sense.

For example, by convincing The Home Depot to end its use of the hormone-disrupting chemicals known as phthalates in one product – flooring – we are building momentum toward safely substituting *all* uses of phthalates as well as other toxic chemicals used in plastics until we can achieve “plastics without harm” across the board.

**ACTION STEPS.** The right selection of winnable short-term campaigns leads naturally to campaign planning to detail the necessary action steps to secure the win. These are the winning tactics needed to apply the winning strategies to move the needle toward long-term victory. But we can't afford to jump to action before ensuring a winning strategy!

**THE RESOURCES.** Based on the campaign plan, then, we can set forth the resources– the right people, skills and capacities, and dollars – needed to win. By securing, sustaining and applying the right resources to execute the campaign plan, we'll generate the short-term wins through the right organizing vehicles that achieve our long-term objectives, based on leveraging the strategies that best reflect the conditions we face. That's action planning!

**How hopeful? - is the wrong question. We need to answer - How are we going to win?**

Coming back to the question of where we are on the scale of hopefulness and why. It's really the wrong question. But I'll answer it. We're on the positive hopeful side of the midpoint between euphoria and despair. Maybe a 6 or 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. Why? Because we're making change, and history shows we can make big changes when the conditions are ripe, and strategies are correct. Yes, there are irreversible tragic outcomes unfolding and the trend lines are negative in many respects now. But the collapse of civilization or even the American empire is not imminent. We can still alter the course of what comes next.

The correct question is how are we going to win? We need to temper our radical vision with strategic analysis. As Sun Tzu put it – if you know yourself, your enemy and your terrain, you shall never be defeated. We need to define our victory conditions in terms of a set of ambitious, winnable long-term objectives. Then for each, what's our action plan?