

## Letter from a Birmingham jail

**Time:** 20 to 30 minutes

**Goal or purpose:**

- To explore different elements of a campaign strategy.
- To help a group reflect on the power of non-violent direct action.

**Preparation/Materials:**

Write the quote below on a wall board or chart before the exercise. Have the quote on hand-outs, and lots of marker pens for marking if you plan to use small groups.

**How it's done/facilitator's notes:**

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "You may well ask, 'Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatise the issue that it can no longer be ignored"

**Write this quote on flip chart paper.**

Facilitate a process of deconstructing the quote, using the action that participants are preparing for. If there is not a common action, use an example of an action that the group is familiar with. Use the following questions to facilitate a discussion;

- What is the crisis? What is the underlying crisis that created the conflict?
- Describe the tension.
- Who is the community who 'refuses to negotiate'?
- How do we 'dramatise the issue'?
- What is the goal of the nonviolent direct action? What does it mean, for the issue to 'no longer be ignored'?

Use coloured markers to underline or circle the concept you are focusing on and to note the descriptions.

Depending on the size of the group, and whether or not the participants are from a single campaign or are a mixed group with a range of backgrounds, it may be helpful to break the group down into pairs or small groups to identify the features before reporting back. If the participants are not directly involved in a particular campaign, use a well known campaign as a starting point, or break the group into pairs and give a different well known campaign to each smaller group. As groups report back you can write things up on the large quote.

**Nonviolence**

Nonviolence and power  
Conflict

**Strategies**

Why things don't just happen  
Planning for nonviolent campaigns  
Conflict escalation

**Nonviolent actions**

Sending the protest message  
Forms of nonviolent action  
Tactic star  
Activism inside oppressive regimes:  
some lessons from South Africa