

Chapter 13

The Crippling Limitations of Classic Activism

The largest and most influential group trying to help solve the sustainability problem is public interest activists. For our purposes an **activist** is anyone actively working to change the behavior of a social system. This includes business managers, NGOs, government employees and agencies, politicians, grassroots activists, academic researchers, scientists, those in for-profit corporations seeking to effect change, and so forth.

The type of activist we are aligned with is **public interest activists**, who seek to help solve problems whose solution would benefit the common good. They work on problems that governments are not addressing or are not addressing well. In our work **activist** is short for public interest activist.

Public interest activists do an endless variety of things to achieve their goals. They march. They petition. They publicize. They lobby politicians to see things their way. And so on, with an endless variety of techniques to get their viewpoints supported by others. At first glance it's a helter-skelter hodgepodge of behavior with no clear pattern. But once you've studied a few dozen campaigns, organizations, and the history of past problems like slavery, women's suffrage, and civil rights, a consistent pattern emerges. Activists use a process called:

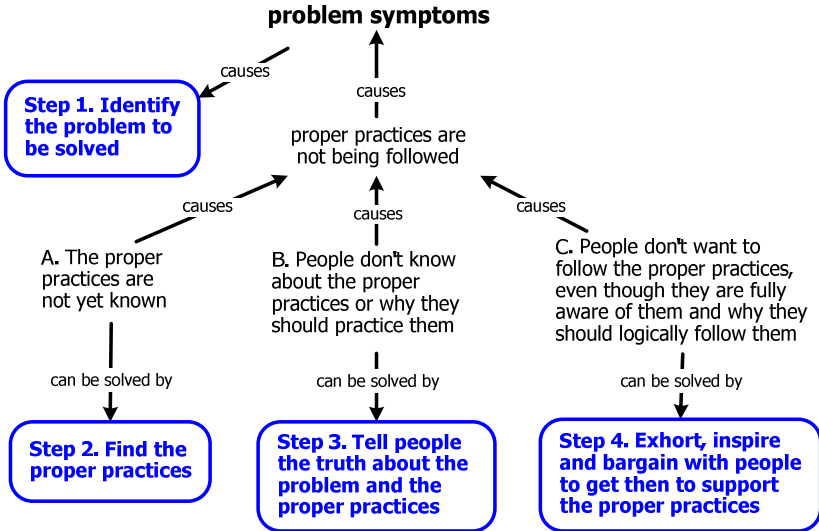
Classic Activism

It's classic because it's the traditional process activists have used for centuries to solve common good problems that democratic governments are not addressing. If it succeeds then governments assume solution responsibility.

The process is worth describing in detail because it's everywhere. It's what nearly everyone uses when they want a government to change a policy. If you've ever signed a petition, sent a letter or email supporting a position, donated money to an NGO who lobbies, been on a march, participated in a campaign to get a new law adopted, and so on, then you have practiced Classic Activism.

What the process looks like is shown on the next page.

The Basic Process of Classic Activism



The process is simple. It has only four steps. Below is a description. To make it easier to refer to the model, node names are underlined.

The process begins with discovery of the problem symptoms, which triggers Step 1. Identify the problem to be solved. This consists of understanding the symptoms enough to identify what they are, when they will occur, and what their immediate causes are, such as loss of habitat contributes to species extinction.

The symptoms are always caused by the proper practices are not being followed. A **proper practice** is a solution that directly reduces problem symptoms. Proper practices are also known as technical solutions. For example, the symptoms of environmental degradation are caused by too many people not following the proper practices that would make their behavior sustainable, like more use of renewable energy. Proper practices are not being followed has three possible causes:

Cause A, solved by step 2 – If the problem is new, problem solvers must start with the first cause: A. The proper practices are not yet known. This can be solved by Step 2. Find the proper practices. For example, renewable energy sources can be developed, tested, and proven to be effective.

Cause B, solved by step 3 – Once the proper practices are found, classic activists move on to the second cause, which is: B. People don't know about the proper practices or why they should follow them. This is to be expected if the problem or proper practices are new. This can sometimes be solved by Step 3. Tell people the truth about the problem and the proper practices. The truth can be spread by lobby-

ing, articles, environmental magazines, interviews, conferences, pilot projects, scientific reports, and so on. For extremely easy problems, steps 2 and 3 are enough.

Cause C, solved by step 4 – But usually there is a third cause: C. People don't want to follow the proper practices, even though they are fully aware of them and why they should logically follow them. This is *individual* change resistance, though due to the missing abstraction it is seldom called that. The standard strategy to overcome it is Step 4. Exhort, inspire and bargain with people to get them to support the proper practices. This is attempted with eloquent writing, passionate speeches, pleadings with decision makers, bargaining with concerned parties, demonstrations, marches, confrontational stunts to shock the public into coming to its senses, and so on.

How the process works by “more of the truth”

Classic Activism is the basic process that activists have been following ever since the government first appeared. It works on those types of problems where “more of the truth” is all that is necessary to prevail, by winning over one mind at a time. It thus works best in democracies.

More of the truth is the practice of steps 2, 3, and 4 of Classic Activism. These steps are discover the truth, promote the truth, and magnify the truth.

The truth is the proper practices society must follow to optimize the good of the group as a whole. If the proper practices are not yet known, they must be found, which is step 2. For example, in the environmental sustainability problem agricultural practices that do not require such heavy use of pesticides may be developed. In health problems, research proving that smoking causes cancer may be done. In racial discrimination problems, research can be done to prove there is no inherent intelligence related genetic difference between races. And so on.

Once the proper practices and why they should be followed are known, all it *should* take to get people to use them is telling them about the proper practices and why they should use them, which is step 3. This is done with articles, magazines, pilot projects, publicity campaigns, lobbying, the use of the courts to tell judges about the real truth of a situation, and so on.

If step 3 fails, then step 4 is tried. The step 3 techniques are cranked up by the use of more inspiration and exhortation, which slips into emotional arguments and rhetoric. Bargaining is also employed. Models of ideal behavior, such as gardener of the month or a city that started recycling are trotted out. Demonstrations to shock the public into paying attention are used. And so on.

The process has tremendous logical appeal. The inner talk runs about like this: “Solving this problem is basically a matter of finding out what's best for the good of all, and then spreading that knowledge. Once people see what's in their own best interests, they will start doing things that way, because people are rational.” Classic

Activism is popular because sometimes it works and it often leads to small or temporary progress. That makes it addictive.

Why Classic Activism is flawed

Once a problem is discovered in step 1, the process has only three more steps for solving it. What does the environmental movement do when these steps fail to work, as is happening today? More of the same, but somehow stronger and better. When faced with solution failure, activists desperately try to find even better practices, tell even more people about them, and exhort and inspire people to follow the proper practices even more. In other words, they "shout the truth" even louder. After all, what else can they do?

Nothing. They are as stuck as a mule train in mile deep mud. Therein lies the tragic flaw of Classic Activism. Year by year, decade by decade, the world continues its downward spiral toward the environmental catastrophes certain to appear unless the sustainability problem is proactively solved now. But as the world's tepid progress on solving the climate change problem demonstrates, that is not happening. The same holds true for many more problems, due to the crippling limitations of Classic Activism.

Classic Activism fails on difficult problems because it lacks root cause analysis. This leads to a second flaw. Because difficult problems usually have multiple root causes, Classic Activism fails to address systemic change resistance.

By contrast, the System Improvement Process is root cause driven and comes with three standard subproblems, each of which must have a root cause. Of these, systemic change resistance is the most important because it's what makes difficult social problems difficult. If a process ignores that truism then it can huff and puff all it wants, but it can never overcome the brick wall of change resistance by trying to blow it down. No amount of patching up the process or ingenious execution will make it work, because Classic Activism is fundamentally flawed. This is a critically important hypothesis because it explains why the environmental movement is failing, which explains why the world is unable to solve the global environmental sustainability problem.

The hypothesis is that Classic Activism ignores root causes and systemic change resistance. It is therefore incapable of solving problems with high change resistance.

A model of how Classic Activism works

This hypothesis was taken up at length by the author in *Change Resistance as the Crux of the Environmental Sustainability Problem*, 2010.⁷⁵ Below is the diagram from the paper explaining how Classic Activism works.

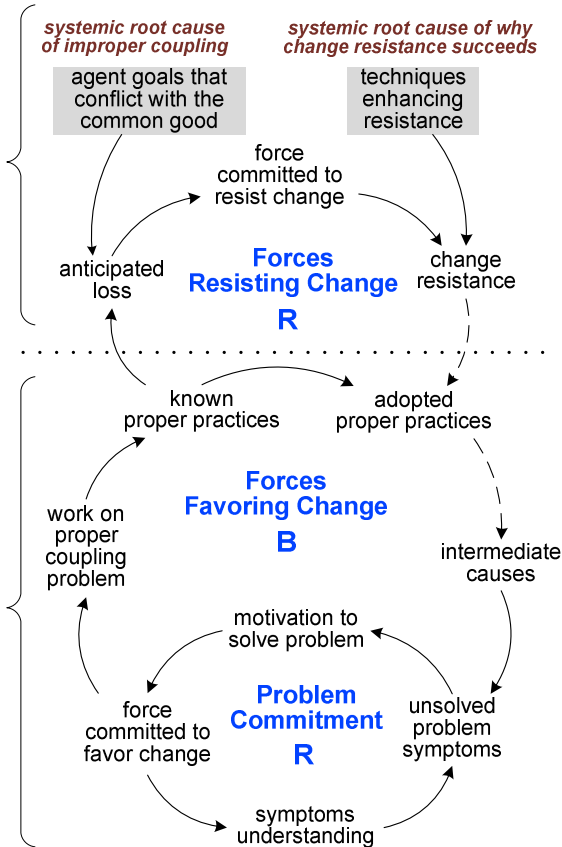
Causal Loop Diagram of the Process of Classic Activism

Legend: Solid arrow is a direct relationship. Dashed arrow is an inverse relationship.

The root causes of failure to solve the environmental sustainability problem probably lie somewhere in the upper loop, because if change resistance was low the problem would already be solved, and because resistance cannot originate in the lower loops.

Here's what classic activists don't see. Since they don't see that systemic change resistance due to a feedback loop driven response must be considered, they assume it's a minor issue and easily solved by overcoming individual change resistance. This is attempted with step 4 of Classic Activism.

This is all the problem solving process of Classic Activism sees. Since that's all it sees, that's what it assumes will solve activist problems. When solutions fail, all classic activists can do is try the same things again, but this time somehow better and harder. Since that doesn't include resolving the root causes of the problem, such efforts will have only modest or temporary effect.



Intermediate causes is the problem to solve. When symptoms of those causes begin to arrive or a few forward-looking thinkers spot those causes and figure out the consequences, unsolved problem symptoms starts to grow. This activates the **Problem Commitment** loop. This causes force committed to favor change to start growing, which activates the **Forces Favoring Change** loop. If the model contained only the loops below the dotted line, growth of the middle loop would eventually increase adopted proper practices enough to reduce the intermediate causes to an acceptable level, which would solve the problem.

But the human system is not that simple. A third loop sits atop the other two, silently lurking, just waiting to be activated. That occurs when known proper practices start growing. This increases anticipated loss for some agents, causing the **Forces**

Resisting Change loop to spring into action. *If loop amplification is strong enough, change resistance will be high enough to overwhelm efforts to get the known proper practices adopted. The result is solution failure.*

Our analysis (covered in a later chapter on change resistance as well as the paper) has discovered two possible *systemic* root causes of why the upper loop exhibits such high gain. These are instances of the two high level root cause classes shown. The root cause of why techniques enhancing resistance succeed must be resolved first, since this resistance also applies to changing agent goals that conflict with the common good.

Given the consequences of not proactively solving the environmental sustainability problem, problem solvers need to push on points with the highest leverage possible. Systemic root causes like these allow that.

But classic activists have no process allowing them to do that. This explains why they are so stuck and getting such poor problem solving results.

Evidence that Classic Activism has failed

The table lists the top global problems classic activists have attempted to solve and the outcomes. The 11 environmental problems are from the SCOPE study presented earlier on page 52. The non-environmental problems are my own representative selection. Overall, Classic Activism has not done well, which is why the world finds itself in continual crisis. The table shows the human system has not only reached its environmental limits. *It has reached its problem solving limits.*

Problem Solving Results of Classic Activism	
Environmental Problems	Solution Success
1. Climate change	Low
2. Freshwater scarcity	Low
3. Deforestation and desertification	Low
4. Freshwater pollution	Medium
5. Loss of biodiversity	Low
6. Air pollution (excluding climate chg)	Medium
7. Soil deterioration	Low
8. Ecosystem functioning	Low
9. Chemical pollution	Medium
10. Stratospheric ozone depletion	High
11. Natural resource depletion	Low
Non-environmental Problems	
Economic stability (recession avoidance)	Low
Unnecessary Wars	Low
Institutional Poverty	Low
The obesity epidemic	Low
Political corruption	Low
Excessive income inequality	Low
Average quality of life	Medium
Racial, gender, age, etc. discrimination	Medium
Urban decay	Medium
The dangers of smoking tobacco	Medium
Drug addiction and related problems	Medium
The autocratic ruler problem	High
Women's suffrage	High
Slavery	High

Evidence that Classic Activism is the *de facto* standard

Even the efforts of commons researchers and eco-economists fall into the pattern of Classic Activism. Comparative analysis is merely a process for finding the proper practices for people to manage themselves sustainably. It's thus part of Classic Activism step 2. Environmental and ecological economics research does the same thing because as we have argued, it too has no concept of systemic change resistance, root causes, etc. The efforts of public interest activists, including environmentalists, is nothing but Classic Activism. *We therefore conclude that Classic Activism is the de facto standard for nearly all work on solving the sustainability problem.*

Below is some evidence to support this conclusion. To make the text easier to follow, here are the four steps of Classic Activism:

1. Identify the problem to be solved.
2. Find the proper practices, if they are not yet known.
3. Tell the people the truth about the problem and the proper practices.
4. If that fails, exhort, inspire, and bargain with people to get them to support the proper practices.

Steps 2, 3, and 4 can be summarized as *find* the truth, *promote* the truth, and *magnify* the truth. Classic Activism's central strategy is "more of the truth."

To my knowledge, all what-to-do environmental literature falls into this process. *Silent Spring* was a superb mixture of steps 3 and 4, with a little bit of 2. *Natural Capitalism*, a book about how corporations can take the lead and create the "next industrial revolution" by switching to more environmentally sustainable technology, uses mostly 2 and 3. Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* is mostly 3. Environmental and nature magazines, such as *Sierra*, *The Ecologist*, *Green Futures*, and *Audubon Magazine*, are 3 and 4. Step 3 is also known as education on the facts or "appeal to logic," while step 4 is the "appeal to emotion," which attempts to magnify the truth with rhetoric and bargaining. The 2006 *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* performed step 1 from an economic point of view and presented evidence that "the benefits of strong, early action considerably outweigh the costs," which is step 3. The actions reviewed were all proper practices. As discussed earlier, the common-pool resource literature sees its mission as finding the right proper coupling practices, which is step 2.

Environmental organizations also rely on steps 2, 3, or 4 to achieve their goals. Lawsuits to comply with existing environmental regulations would seem to fall outside of 2, 3, or 4. However, this is enforcement of the legal truth by telling judges about the truth of the facts involved. It is thus a form of 3. Lobbying is a mixture of 3 and 4. Scientific research into alternative energy, sustainable agriculture, recycling, ways to reduce population, and so forth is 2. Extremist actions such as sit-ins and

blocking nuclear test sites are forms of 4. So are demonstrations, marches, and publicity stunts. Polls, such as how strongly people support a clean environment, are a form of 3. They are “the truth” why decision makers should enforce proper practices. Corporate social responsibility campaigns, since they play on psychological elements, are step 4.

Even the innovative sustainability solutions pioneered in developing countries, such as ecotourism, microfinance, acceleration of the demographic transition, direct marketing cooperatives for green products, and community based common-pool resource management, are a collection of better proper practices. Perfecting them is step 2. Education and assistance is step 3. Pleading and bargaining with developed nations, NGOs, and international agencies to support them and with developing countries to adopt them is step 4.

The Limits to Growth employed the general pattern of Classic Activism. The World3 model focused mostly on step 1: identify the problem. The 1972 first edition said little about the solution. But due to lack of solution progress, the second and third editions did. The 1992 second edition presented “a simple set of general guidelines for restructuring the world system toward sustainability,” such as “improve the signals... speed up response times... minimize the use of nonrenewable resources.” (p213-214) These are proper coupling practices, so the book was advocating step 2 and performing step 3. The authors acknowledged the presence of systemic change resistance: “Systems strongly resist changes in their information flows, especially in their rules and goals.” (p223) But when addressing how to deal with resistance, the authors turned to the old paradigm of Classic Activism: “In our search for ways to encourage the peaceful restructuring of a system that naturally resists its own transformation, we have tried many tools.” (p223) The tools were “visioning, networking, truth-telling, learning, and loving.” (p224) These are techniques used to implement Classic Activism steps 3 and 4. The 2004 third edition repeated these suggestions.

More recent modeling efforts continue to follow the four steps of Classic Activism. The Millennium Institute’s Threshold 21 sustainability model focuses on how a nation can better manage proper coupling. The IPCC assessment reports seek “the understanding of human induced climate change, potential impacts of climate change and options for mitigation and adaptation.”⁷⁶ But this understanding, which is heavily model based, starts with the symptoms and stops at the same intermediate causes of the World3 model: the IPAT factors. Like the three editions of *Limits to Growth*, the four IPCC assessment reports have progressively tip toed into Classic Activism steps 3 and 4. The fourth report took a leap in section 4: Adaptation and Mitigation Options. This contained an extensive listing of existing proper practices and projections by sector on their effectiveness, which is step 3. Section 5, The Long-term Perspective, used “five reasons for concern” to emphasize that “Adaptation is necessary in the short and longer term to address impacts resulting from the warming that

would occur even for the lowest stabilization scenarios assessed.” While expressed in the dry language of scientists, this is nevertheless the exhortation of step 4.

A classic example of Classic Activism was Al Gores’ 2006 documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*. The film described the climate change problem and the urgency of solving it. The film concluded with Al saying:

Each one of us is a cause of global warming, but each one of us can make choices to change that with the things we buy, the electricity we use, the cars we drive; we can make choices to bring our individual carbon emissions to zero. The solutions are in our hands, *we just have to have the determination to make it happen. We have everything that we need to reduce carbon emissions, everything but political will.* But in America, the will to act is a renewable resource.

The 4 solutions listed are proper practices. There is, however, a hint of acknowledgement that overcoming change resistance is the real challenge, when Gore says “...we just have to have the determination to make it happen. We have everything that we need to reduce carbon emissions, everything but political will.”

The 27 solutions that appear during the film’s closing credits are mostly proper coupling solutions. The first nine are:⁷⁷

1. Go to www.climatecrisis.net.
2. You can reduce your carbon emissions. In fact, you can even reduce your carbon emissions to zero.
3. Buy energy efficient appliances & light bulbs.
4. Change your thermostat (and use clock thermostats) to reduce energy for heating & cooling.
5. Weatherize your house, increase insulation, get an energy audit.
6. Recycle.
7. If you can, buy a hybrid car.
8. When you can, walk or ride a bicycle.
9. Where you can, use light rail & mass transit.

Some solutions are attempts to overcome *individual* change resistance, such as:

10. Tell your parents not to ruin the world that you will live in.
11. If you are a parent, join with your children to save the world they will live in.
14. Vote for leaders who pledge to solve this crisis.
15. Write to congress. If they don't listen, run for congress.
17. Speak up in your community.

None of the 27 solutions deal with *systemic* change resistance, which is the real problem to solve. An Inconvenient Truth thus performs only steps 3 and 4.

The evidence shows that sustainability writers, organizations, innovative developing country solutions, and models all center on Classic Activism. None that we are aware of deviate from the four steps.

For even more evidence Classic Activism is the *de facto* standard, we turn to a 64 page chapter on *An Assessment of Process Maturity* from *Analytical Activism*.⁷⁸ The chapter contains the table on the next page. The assessment was performed in 2006. For detail see the book.

The table on the next page lists 10 representative medium to large successful environmental organizations, including the best I could find in the world. Two are at the government level: the European Union Environmental Directorate General and the United Nations Environmental Program.

Each organization was rated on 11 process maturity factors using the system shown. The factors are divided into three groups. The Classic Activism group is the 4 steps of that process. The other two groups employ factors that would be found if an organization was using a process that fit the problem as well as the System Improvement Process.

Notice how the fourth factor, step 4 of Classic Activism, has a weight of zero. This is because that step is ineffective when change resistance is high. Since the ratings are for how well an organization's process can handle difficult problems, this makes sense.

The table is designed to allow environmental organizations to be objectively assessed on their ability to solve difficult environmental problems. We can't say the ratings are exact. But we can say they are in the ballpark. The last row in the table theorizes a process maturity rating of 8,000 or more is needed to solve truly difficult social problems.

The assessment contains a number of provocative patterns. All ten organizations scored high in Classic Activism. That doesn't prove they are dependent on that process, because they could also be using steps from other more mature processes, like SIP. However, any organization that scores high in Classic Activism and low in the other factors is clearly a classic activist organization. This is so for all but two organizations. But even these two score well below 8,000. The dismal conclusion is there may be no organization in the world presently capable of solving the sustainability problem.

A shocking discovery is the top environmental organization in the world, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), scored 169, the lowest rating in the table. The UNEP was designed to be the world's best hope for solving the sustainability problem. What happened?

The answer is stunningly simple. The UNEP practices Classic Activism. It focuses on proper coupling solutions. Its 2010 Annual Report stated that: ⁷⁹

2010 marked the beginning of a period of new, strategic and transformational direction for UNEP as it began implementing its Medium Term Strategy (MTS) for 2010-2013 across six areas: Climate change; Disasters and conflicts; Ecosystem management; Environmental governance; Harmful substances and hazardous waste; Resource efficiency, Sustainable consumption and production.

The six areas are all proper practices. The UNEP's work falls into steps 2 and 3, with some 4.

There's more to say, but in order to keep this book short we refer you to the chapter the table came from.

An Assessment of Process Maturity																					
Showing the dominance of Classic Activism and why that causes low mission success																					
<p>The table is designed to assess process maturity for solving difficult environmental problems. The assessment was performed in 2006.</p> <p>Only the weighted scores are shown. To calculate the raw scores, divide the weighted score by the element weight.</p> <p>Raw scores for each key process element are assigned in this manner:</p> <p>0 – Does not exist or not done 1 – Very low productivity 2 – Slightly productive 3 – Moderately productive 4 – Highly productive 5 – World class</p> <p>An underline means not applicable, with an automatic raw score of 3.</p>	Key Process Elements																				
	Classic Activism				Analytical Activism				Problem Domain												
	1. Identify the problem	2. Find the proper practices (PP)	3. Tell the people the truth about the problem and the PP	4. If that fails, exhort and inspire people to support the PP	Weighted subtotal				5. Formal definition, mgt, and continuous improvement	6. A true analysis of the problem is performed	7. The Scientific Method is used to prove all key assumptions	8. Learning from past failures and successes is maximized	Weighted subtotal								
Element weight	1	1	1	0					4	3	3	2									
Max weighted score	5	5	5	0	15				20	15	15	10	60								
Organizations																					
1. Alliance for Climate Pro	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>	5	0	11	0	0	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	15	225	L				
2. Club of Rome	2	2	5	0	9	0	3	0	4	7	0	0	0	0	16	256	L				
3. EU Environmental DG	5	5	5	0	15	12	9	9	10	40	<u>6</u>	8	<u>3</u>	17	72	5,184	H				
4. Natural Step	3	4	5	0	12	4	0	0	1	5	0	0	0	0	17	289	L				
5. Natural Res Def Council	3	<u>3</u>	5	0	11	0	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	0	17	289	L				
6. Nature Conservancy	5	5	5	0	15	20	12	12	8	52	0	0	0	0	67	4,489	M				
7. Sierra Club	2	<u>3</u>	5	0	10	4	0	0	4	8	0	0	0	0	18	424	L				
8. United Nations Env Prog	1	<u>3</u>	5	0	9	0	0	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	13	169	L				
9. Union of Concerned Sc	2	5	5	0	12	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	14	196	L				
10. World Resources Inst	2	5	5	0	11	0	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	0	18	424	L				
(Solution Factory)	5	3	3	0	11	16	15	15	8	54	10	10	5	25	90	8,100	H				
														Total score on a scale of 0 to 100		100		Total score squared, on a scale of 0 to 10,000.		10,000	
Overall mission success – Low, Medium, High																					

How you can spot Classic Activism in ten seconds

It's easy once you know the patterns. Classic Activism has its place. It works on easy problems. Steps 1, 2, and 3, plus a smidgeon of 4 are used as a subprocess of SIP when persuasive communication is necessary and change resistance is low, such when promoting the results of research with this book.

This question is important because most activists are thoroughly convinced they're already following the best problem solving approach possible. If you can spot Classic Activism instantly you can help classic activists wake up. Or you can see it in your own organization and wake it up.

When I spot reliance on buzzwords like “should” or “must,” or variants of questions like “Will we make the right choice in time?” or “How could we be so stupid as to...?” in activist material, I know it's Classic Activism without reading any further. That's inspiration and exhortation, part of step four.

When I see repeated, strong attempts to promote “more of the truth” and especially the word “truth” itself, as in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, it's an instant giveaway Classic Activism is the means behind the message. This is so common a Google search on “‘the truth about’ sustainability” brings up 36 million hits. Try it and scan the results. You will find yourself gazing at an endless sea of Classic Activism. It helps, but it's not sufficient.

Another pattern is an environmental organization or prominent activist trying the same thing over and over and failing. Upon inspection it's always Classic Activism, no matter how ingenious and novel it appears on the surface. Every environmental organization over 30 years old is guilty of this pattern. The famous quote misattributed to Einstein applies: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

The saddest pattern of all occurs in hype like *What don't you understand about (issue name)?* Even worse are actual environmental article titles like *Dubya's Dictionary – When the president says ‘green-green-lima-bean,’ he means you*, or *Bush's Seven Deadly Sins – The worst of the worst*, or *Ignoble Prize – Genius award it ain't*.⁸⁰ Messages like these drift into demonizing the enemy, a form of the *ad hominem* fallacy. This is deception and signals whoever created the message has slipped into **The Race to the Bottom among Politicians** tactics, which is a treacherous slippery slope. Messages like these thus do more harm than good.

Let's look at a typical example. Consider James Hansen's *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*, 2009. Hansen is a courageous and brilliant scientist, but his book is a perfect example of Classic Activism at its best. “The Truth About” tells us the book will be using “more of the truth” to inspire and exhort the reader that this is “Our Last Chance” to avoid “the Coming Climate Catastrophe.” From the title alone we

know the book will be banging away with all four steps of Classic Activism and nothing more.

This is easily confirmed by the first four blurbs about the book on www.stormsofmygrandchildren.com. The site headline shouts “AN URGENT AND PROVOCATIVE CALL TO ACTION FROM THE WORLD’S LEADING CLIMATE SCIENTIST.” Translated, this really says “AN URGENT AND PROVOCATIVE CALL TO ACTION ABOUT THE CLIMATE CHANGE PROBLEM USING CLASSIC ACTIVISM.” It doesn’t matter who the message is from because once you’ve seen the pattern enough times, they’re all the same.

Below are the blurbs. Note the heavy dose of “more of the truth” in a high inspiration/exhortation “we must solve the problem now” manner. The telltale signs of Classic Activism are italicized. Bolding is in the original.

In *Storms of My Grandchildren*, James Hansen gives us the opportunity to watch a scientist who is *sick of silence and compromise*... offer up the fruits of four-plus decades of inquiry and ingenuity *just in case he might change the course of history*. – **L.A. Times**

Dr. James Hansen is *Paul Revere to the foreboding tyranny of climate chaos—a modern-day hero* who has *braved criticism and censure and put his career and fortune at stake* to issue the *call to arms* against the *apocalyptic forces of ignorance and greed*. – **Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.**

When the history of the climate crisis is written, Hansen will be seen as the scientist with the most *powerful and consistent voice calling for intelligent action* to preserve our planet's environment. – **Al Gore**, *Time Magazine*

Jim Hansen is the *planet's great hero*. He offered us the *warning* we needed twenty years ago, and has worked with *enormous courage* ever since to try and make sure *we heeded it*. We'll know before long if that effort bears fruit—if it does, *literally no one deserves more credit* than Dr. Hansen. – **Bill McKibben**, coordinator 350.org and author of *The End of Nature*.

For much more see the *An Assessment of Process Maturity* chapter in the *Analytical Activism* book. Then you can spot the pattern in one second.

Why Classic Activism is so addictive

A few pages back I wrote that “Classic Activism is popular because sometimes it works and it often leads to small or temporary progress. That makes it addictive.”

That’s an understatement. Classic Activism is so habit forming that despite decades of failure when using it on problems like sustainability, the process remains as popular as ever. Classic Activism is the world’s leading process for solving public interest activist problems. Despite solid proof it fails over and over on difficult social problems, enthusiasm for it remains so solid that activists are not looking for a better alternative. They are instead trying to make Classic Activism work by improving it. That’s like your house is burning down and you’re investing more money in it to make it more comfortable until the roof collapses or the flames force you out. It’s also like trying the same thing over and over again with only small changes and expecting the results to be radically different.

Exactly why Classic Activism is so perennially popular has long evaded me. I’ve been on a constant lookout for a satisfying explanation for years. Today, a few hours ago, I found the answer.

I was pleasantly doing a close read of *SPIN Selling* by Neil Rackham, 1988. It’s a research-based text on the differences between small and big sales, and how to change your sales approach to close more big sales using a process called SPIN. The book interested me because although I’m not selling a high dollar item, I am “selling” a high investment item. It will take most activists or their organizations hundreds of person hours to evaluate and began to apply the concepts in this book and on the rest of Thwink.org. After that it will probably take them thousands of hours and years to see the full payoff they’re looking for. So I certainly need to learn how to help people take this very large step, if these concepts fit their needs.

I had thought that Classic Activism is addictive because it works on problems with low change resistance, while it fails on those with high change resistance. Classic activists can’t tell the difference between low and high change resistance problems, so they simplify by assuming the process is basically correct but fails due to somehow being executed wrong on particular problems. When it fails they try steps 2, 3, and 4 again, but this time somehow differently and better.

This theory was unsatisfying because most of the activists I’ve worked with and read about are intelligent. They should not be fooled by a process that doesn’t work. If Classic Activism fails repeatedly they should abandon it. But yet they have not. On the contrary, activists cling to it like it’s a lifesaver and about to lead them to the Promised Land, any day now. As one of my friends said when we were discussing these issues, “To a classic activist, success is always right around the corner.”

Rackham showed me where my theory was wrong. He did it in a most unexpected fashion. There I was, reading along about “What Makes a Compulsive Closer?” on page 37. That’s like a compulsive classic activist, so my interest picked

up. In sales, **closing** means saying things to encourage the customer to make a buying decision, like “Shall we make our first delivery next month?” Rackham had already described how aggressive but intelligent closing attempts worked well on small sale items, like in retail. But his research showed that on high value items, such as expensive cameras and company wide computer systems, there was no relationship between more closing attempts and finally getting the sale. In fact, the more research he did, the more evidence he discovered that the more often closing was tried when selling high value items, the *less* often the customer finally decided to buy. This was a counter-intuitive discovery that rocked the sales industry.

Here’s how Rackham made his discovery:

Experienced salespeople, their managers, their trainers, and the experts who write books on how to sell aren’t fools. How could they be devoting so much time and energy to a set of techniques that not only don’t work but, in larger sales are actively counterproductive? What’s so compelling about closing?

The answer came to me during a seminar I was running with the California management consultant Roger Harrison. In one session that Roger was conducting, the topic was ineffective behavior patterns and their causes. He explained to the class that sometimes people continue to do things that don’t bring results, all the while believing strongly that what they are doing is effective. “Hmm, like salespeople who believe in closing,” I thought. Roger went on to suggest that there are only two reasons why people would continue to behave in an unsuccessful way. Either they are crazy or *there’s something in their environment that’s rewarding and encouraging the use of the effective behavior.*

The italics are in the original. I was now in full attention mode. I picked up my pen and wrote in the margin “What’s so compelling about Classic Activism?” followed by four guesses. None turned out to be right.

The book continued:

The more I thought about this, the more it gave me the explanation I’d been looking for. I remembered the time when I, too, had been so enthusiastic about closing. How did I get “hooked” into becoming a hard closer? [Earlier the author had described his first years in sales, when he became a hard closer. Later he changed due to the research described in the book.] It all went back to the time I nervously tried my first Alternative Close: “Would you prefer the project to begin in September or in November?” In replying “Let’s start in September,” my client *rewarded* my use of a close by giving me the business. I said the words—I got the order.

When I stopped to think about it, closing behaviors were the only ones, out of the 116 we studied in our research, that were directly rewarded or reinforced by orders. Like so many other salespeople, because my close was rewarded with an order, I'd somehow assumed that using the close had *caused* the order. Of course, from what I now know, it was the way I'd developed my client's needs that had brought me the business. It had nothing to do with my close. The project would have gone ahead with or without my new closing technique.

At last I understood why closing received so much attention in selling. It was the most immediately rewarded of all sales behaviors. Ask the customer a good question that develops needs and you don't instantly get rewarded with an order. But use some magic closing catchphrase at the moment of decision—some of the time—you'll get a rewarding "Yes, I'll buy." ...

As a result of this insight, I became more comfortable about our research and its implications. It was indeed possible that our research was right and that most of the rest of the world was out of step.

Now I suddenly had the same insight Rackham had. Classic activists are *rewarded* by incessant use of Classic Activism step 4, which was the last step in the process before the "sale." This causes them to assume that using that step *caused* the "sale" when in fact it was something else. Even low change resistance large-scale social problems (like slavery and universal suffrage) take a long time to solve, generally decades or centuries. It takes a long time for activists to define the problem (step 1), research the proper practices needed to solve it (step 2), and then promote the truth about those practices to the public and decision makers (step 3) who then must take their own long time to study the matter and communicate it to their peers. This takes so excruciatingly long that it's hard to resist piling on plenty of exhortation, inspiration, and bargaining pressure (step 4). But yet if activists have done a good job with steps 1, 2, and 3, the customer will eventually decide to adopt the necessary proper practices even without the pressure of step 4. What really causes the customer to finally say yes is not step 4. It's the same thing that worked for Rackham: "Of course, from what I now know, it was the way I'd developed my client's needs that had brought me the business. It had nothing to do with my close."

Finally I understand why Classic Activism is so fanatically addictive. It's because the last step in the process is so often rewarded by the system accepting the solution. That last step is *the* hallmark of Classic Activism. It's what you see all over environmental books, magazines, articles, posters, and so on. The same holds for other problem types, like alleviating poverty, ending numerous forms of discrimination, and solving the Money in Politics problem. Without the thrilling excitement of copious amounts of exhortation and inspiration, with generous dashes of clever ne-

gotiating (bargaining) thrown in, Classic Activism would be as dull as watching a stone just sit there. As an addictive ideology it would lack its *pièce de résistance*.

The reason step 4 of Classic Activism is so thrilling is it's widely believed that's what makes the process work. But as Rackham's passage shows, that's an illusion. Try to tell that to a die-hard classic activist, however, and you will get the same results I have. I've now worked on the inside with four classic activist NGOs. In the end, each insisted their approach would eventually work and there was no need for reform. My work with them failed to change the organization at all. I'm now four for four on this, so I've moved on to another approach. You are reading it.

Conclusions

The key conclusion of this and the previous two chapters is the environmental movement is using the right process for easy problems but the wrong process for difficult problems. This means public interest activism has not yet adopted a process that fits the problem. The field is committing all Six Deadly Sins of the Wrong Process, and is thus doomed to eternal frustration and further failure on tough problems. This will remain true no matter how astutely or how hard activists work, because they are executing the wrong process.

Writing this portion of the book has put me into a bit of a grim mood, one reminiscent of the same sense of discouragement I felt when I created the assessment table in 2006. But that quickly passed and changed to encouragement. The table shows that for activist organizations there is a way out. All that's necessary is to adopt the key process elements needed to raise your process maturity level up to 8,000 or so. It can be done. Look how close two of the organizations are.

There's a higher level to think on. It's possible to conclude that the central hypothesis of *Change Resistance as the Crux of the Environmental Sustainability Problem* is wrong. The hypothesis was that "systemic change resistance is the crux of the problem and must be solved first." That's not the crux. A more correct hypothesis would be that process maturity in public interest activist organizations, including those in government and academia, is too low to solve the sustainability problem, including change resistance. *Therefore the process maturity problem is the crux because it must be solved first.*⁸¹

Let's turn our attention to how that can be done.