



# HOW TO

# Deal with Intimidation

## INTIMIDATION

Have you or other members of your group been called “radical” because of what you believe is right for you community? Are you worried about losing your job or a bank loan or about being sued for speaking out on important issues in your community?

If so, you are a victim of **intimidation** - an attempt to bully you into abdicating your right to have a say in the decisions that affect your life and your community. It happens all the time.

Energy companies have tried to undermine funding of several WORC groups, especially from churches and church organizations, by spreading misinformation, rumors and even blatant lies about the groups and their activities.

Corporations and government agencies have worked to isolate our groups and our members in their communities by name-calling - labelling us or our motives or tactics as “radical,” “obstructionist,” “elitist,” or any of dozens of other unsavory terms.

If you are being intimidated, *never forget why it is happening*. It means you are doing good work, and that your opponents are desperate. It is a sign that you are taking actions which challenge the existing power relationships in your community, and that those with power want you to back off.

## FIVE COMMON INTIMIDATION TACTICS

### 1. PEEL OFF INDIVIDUALS

Threatening individual members or would-be members of your group with the loss of their job or loss of respect in the community. The purpose of this tactic is to weaken your group’s ability or desire to act.

### 2. REFUSE TO DEAL WITH LEADERS

Treating leaders of your group as nuts, or trivializing them as a bunch of “tree-huggers” or “extremists.” This is designed to reveal weakness in your leaders and to isolate them from the other members of your group.

### 3. ISOLATE THE GROUP

Getting public officials, community leaders, or opinion makers (newspaper editors, for example) to criticize the group’s actions, or paint its leaders as radicals. This tactic is designed to keep you too busy defending yourselves or fighting amongst yourselves to do anything productive.

### 4. DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Making a deal with one of your allies, giving them something they want that is less than your group will accept. The purpose of this tactic is to leave your group standing alone and looking radical or extreme.

### 5. LET’S YOU AND HIM FIGHT

Getting your group to fight with one of your allies (using the **divide and conquer** strategy), or sponsor a new group in the community to fight with you (another **isolate the group** strategy). The idea here is to weaken your energy and credibility in the community.

Intimidation tactics can be **overt**: threats to retaliate legally, economically or (in very rare cases) physically, against your leaders, members, or your whole group. Intimidation can take the form of legal action, but your opponents are far more likely to *threaten* legal action than to actually take you to court.

Most of the campaigns of intimidation and fear are more **subtle**, such as name-calling, covertly organizing a “counter-group” to polarize your community, trying to weaken your group by making you respond to rumors and lies about your group and “divide and conquer” tactics to split you from your friends and allies. On the next page are some basic principles for dealing with all kinds of intimidation and harassment.

### *The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America*

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

# DEALING WITH INTIMIDATION

## 1. DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM IMMEDIATELY

Rumors and fear spawned by an opponents's intimidation tactic can spread rapidly through your group (and your community), peeling off members and supporters and poisoning the spirits of those who stay in the group. It's like treating a snake bite: the faster you stabilize the patient and purge the poison, the less trauma you'll have to deal with.

## 2. TAKE PEOPLE'S FEAR OF INTIMIDATION SERIOUSLY

Never belittle or minimize anyone's fears or the potential threat, even if there are no overt or proven instances of intimidation. Your opponents are trying to spread fear because it is one of the main reasons people don't join citizens' groups or take action to help you win. You need to identify the reasons for people's fear and help them deal with it. Ask, "what is the worst thing that can happen?" Then figure out how you could respond to this worst-case scenario. Our fears usually subside when we discuss them out loud; naming them is the first step to overcoming them.

## 3. DISCUSS EXACTLY WHAT IS GOING ON AND WHY OPENLY IN YOUR GROUP

Intimidation tactics depend on the spread of rumors and on a group's failure to bring the problem to the surface. Name-calling, nasty rumors and other kinds of intimidation often make our upstanding, law-abiding members feel guilty - we must have done something wrong to provoke this

trouble - if they don't know why it is happening. Members may begin to think, "maybe this group is too radical," or "I don't know if it's worth it, to have my neighbors think I'm a kook." But if you talk about what's going on and why - your opponent is desperately trying to shut you up because you are taking effective actions - your group can feel a sense of *accomplishment* instead of guilt and fear, in the face of intimidation tactics.

## 4. TURN IT AROUND - FAST - BY EXPOSING THE TACTIC PUBLICLY

Responding to intimidation is like Jujitsu: you want to use your opponents' momentum and power against them.

A coal company used its connections to cancel the grazing leases of the president of a citizens' group. The company was retaliating for a letter the group wrote to prospective coal customers, criticizing the company's proposed mine. The citizens' group complained about the tactic to the press, in testimony before Congress, to every public official who might ever make a decision about the mine - and in *another* letter to the prospective coal customers letting them know just what kind of company was trying to sell them coal.

## 5. USE THE OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN YOUR GROUP

The best *defense* against intimidation tactics is for the group to stick together and to stand behind all of its

## WHEN INTIMIDATION IS OVERT

Although subtle attempts at intimidation are most common, citizens' groups or their leaders may face overt threats of economic or even physical retaliation. Following are some extra steps for dealing with this extra-nasty kind of tactic:

### Shine a bright light on it.

The meanest and nastiest acts of intimidation, like cockroaches, are usually seen only in the dark. When exposed to public scrutiny, an opponent will usually stop - and may even apologize, or disavow the tactic.

### Call the appropriate authorities.

If you are threatened with violence or harassment, call law enforcement officials. If you are the victim of economic retaliation, notify public officials. Some kinds of harassment and intimidation are crimes.

### Make sure all your actions are done in a group.

There is safety in numbers. (When things are really dicey, there is also safety in having your church allies with you. This is irreverently known as "collars up front".) More overt tactics require more overt unity in your response. If a tactic is designed to "peel off" an individual through fear, the group must stand behind that individual.

# DEALING WITH INTIMIDATION

members. The best result of an opponent's attempt to intimidate you is to emerge stronger, more resolute, crisis-tested. A strong, democratically-run, active organization is the least vulnerable to intimidation tactics.

## 6. STICK TO YOUR POSITIONS, BE PROUD OF THEM, AND DON'T BACK DOWN

Don't be defensive about what you stand for and why you are fighting. That is exactly what your opponent is trying to scare you into doing. If you believe in what you are fighting for, an important part of your counteroffensive is to reassert what you stand for, and why it's worth fighting for. This is a good time for your group to review its organizational mission and goals, so you don't forget the vision and values that unite you.

## 7. RESPOND BOLDLY, WITH ACTION

Serious attempts at intimidation require more than a letter-to-the-editor in response (it's a good idea, but just not enough in itself). Some physical action is called for - maybe a rally, with flags and uniforms and patriotic songs, in support of the First Amendment. The effects of intimidation tactics can be paralyzing, your response needs to get people back on their feet.

## 8. KNOW YOUR FRIENDS AND ASK THEM FOR HELP

When trouble comes, it's important to rally your friends around you (especially if your opponent is trying to divide you from them). An action with your allies and supporters shows your

opponents that you are united, that the tactics of division have failed.

## 9. KNOW YOUR OPPONENT, AND INCREASE THE PRESSURE

If you haven't already done it, compile a list of your opponent's sins and misdeeds. When you counterattack publicly, this list of wrongdoing will validate your position, and reduce your opponent's credibility.

## 10. STICK TOGETHER, AND STICK WITH THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

An attack on any member of your group is an attack on the whole group. Your opponent *wants* to spread dissension in your ranks. This is no time to fight with each other. Involve everyone in analyzing the problem, planning your response, and fighting back. You don't want heroes who take all the heat, or dictators who make all the decisions.

## CITIZENS RESPOND TO HATE

In 1993, hate activities in Billings, Montana reached a crescendo. Ku Klux Klan flyers were distributed, the Jewish family cemetery was desecrated, and a brick was thrown through the window of a five year-old boy who displayed a Menorah for Hanukkah.

Rather than resigning itself to the growing climate of hate, the community took a stand. The police chief, churches and local labor unions all responded with marches, vigils, resolutions, and other actions.

The *Billings Gazette* printed full-page Menorahs that were cut out and displayed in nearly 10,000 homes and businesses. Since then, no serious acts of hate violence have been reported in Billings.



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

### WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council  
Dakota Rural Action  
Idaho Rural Council  
Northern Plains Resource Council  
Oregon Rural Action  
Powder River Basin Resource Council  
Western Colorado Congress

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### FOR MORE ON INTIMIDATION:

**Principles of Community Organizing** training sessions are held twice a year by WORC. **Advanced Leadership and Staff Development** training sessions are also held by WORC.

**How to Negotiate and How to Speak in Public** are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

### MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – [www.worc.org](http://www.worc.org). These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

