

Answering “What Should I Do?” Is Easier When You Know the Roles of Social Movements

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The United States is going in the wrong direction on a wide range of social, economic and foreign policy issues and people are justifiably upset and angry. One question we are regularly asked is: “What should I do?” In our last two newsletters, we examined the [stages of successful social movements](#) to show [how movements can progress toward victories](#). This week, we attempt to answer the question by describing the fifth class of the [Popular Resistance School](#), [“The Roles of Individuals and Movements”](#) and how to be effective at them.

There are many necessary roles in the popular movement at this time, which means there is something for everyone to do. We are at a critical moment when [the fifteen core issues of the movement](#) for economic, racial and environmental justice as well as peace are in crisis and people are organizing to solve them.

As we wrote in 2011, during the preparations to occupy Freedom Plaza in Washington, DC, on a broad range of issues from taxing the rich to getting money out of politics to strengthening the social safety net and more, there is already [majority support](#). In 2014, Josh Sager [demonstrated](#) that while in electoral politics the US appears to be center-right (and shifting ever rightward), the people’s positions are center-left. National consensus for solutions to the crises is growing despite the lack of commercial media coverage.

The necessary ingredients for winning major social changes – national consensus on issues and a mobilized ‘movement of movements’ – are developing, but these ingredients merely create the conditions for change. To realize those changes, we need to understand what the various roles are that people need to take on and how to be effective in those roles by avoiding the pitfalls that could undermine our work toward the society we desire to create.

Four Essential Roles In The Movement

There are [four basic roles](#) in a movement and each one is needed. Some people can play more than one role or can move from one to another and some will be most comfortable focusing on one role. The prominence of each role changes throughout the development of a successful social movement, as the tasks of each stage, differ. People often gravitate toward one role and [that can be seen early in life](#) in the way they respond to challenges. Review this list and consider which roles resonate with you.

1. The Advocate or Reformer: The advocate is most drawn to working with those in authority to create change, perhaps through educating legislators, writing policy

or using the courts. The movement role played by the advocate is to translate the demands of the people's movement for the power structure and to act as a watchdog for the movement.

2. The Organizer or Change Agent: The organizer works to bring people together to solve problems, especially in a way that is empowering such as using horizontal, democratic processes for making decisions. The movement role played by the organizer is to grow the movement and to facilitate coordinated strategic activities.
3. The Helper or Citizen: The helper is typically a more mainstream person who is drawn to providing direct aid to solve problems. If a neighbor can't shovel the snow off their sidewalk, the helper will do it. The role that the helper plays in the movement is to show that there is widespread support for the aims of the movement and to bring greater legitimacy to the movement.
4. The Rebel: The rebel is one who is most likely to make a lot of noise about an injustice. When something bad happens, the rebel wants everyone to know and will confront the power holders about it. The role that the rebel plays is to highlight injustice and to take direct action in order to create the tension required for changes to occur.

To be effective, the roles need to be handled in ways that achieve the grand strategy of the movement, i.e. (1) To grow the movement by pulling people toward it, especially people in the power structure. (2) To create unity in the movement so solidarity is strengthened and people work together for common objectives. And, (3) To deepen our understanding of the issues and the solutions to injustices and crisis situations that are needed.

Each of these roles can be played in ways that achieve these strategies or, if done poorly, can undermine the movement. For example, an effective advocate will be accountable to the people in the movement and will represent their views, while an ineffective advocate may start to ally more with the power holders than with the people and might try to convince the movement to compromise in ways that violate their fundamental goals.

An organizer will ideally provide the tools and support that empower people to be creative and to make decisions and take actions that are strategic, while an ineffective organizer will behave in a way that is hierarchical, ordering people to take action and excluding diverse views instead of building consensus for the action. The heads of some non-governmental organizations may come to believe they are the movement, rather than recognizing their power comes from the movement.

The rebel can create conflicts with police or others that repel people and push them away from the movement. Using overly strident tactics can actually empower the police or those in power to crack down on the movement. Done well, the rebel shows courage that becomes contagious. We discussed this and more with George Lakey, an activist who has been involved in many social movements and has trained many activists, on the Clearing the FOG podcast, [available here on Mondays](#).

In particular, Lakey admonishes people to avoid being drawn into conflict by right-wing white supremacists because this will legitimize state suppression of the movement and repel people who are unpersuaded from the movement. There will be a white supremacist rally in front of the White House in Washington, DC on August 12. In response, a coalition of organizations from DC and surrounding states are organizing a celebration of diversity in

than sowing division.

A current example of this is the coalition of peace and justice movements that are organizing to oppose President Trump's military parade in Washington, DC in November, which happens to be the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day (changed to Veteran's Day in 1954). A number of different groups were organizing responses to the parade. In February, those groups came together to organize in a collaborative way that has space for a variety of actions under a common theme of divesting from war and investing in peace. The website is NoTrumpMilitaryParade.us. You can sign on as an organization or an individual there.

The coalition has written a [statement and is asking other organizations to sign on](#) in support. The statement acknowledges the many ways that militarism causes harm at home and abroad. At home, militarism normalizes violence, which results in violence in our communities. Spending on the Pentagon is consuming an increasing proportion of our federal discretionary budget, now almost two-thirds, when those dollars are needed for housing, education, health care, jobs and more. The military is the biggest polluter and user of fossil fuels in the world, contributing to environmental destruction and climate change. All organizations who agree with the statement are invited to sign on. This will be published on August 8, but sign-ons will continue after that. [Read the statement and sign-on here](#).

When we create a movement of movements, which is essential for ultimate victory, we are bringing diverse people and organizations into a coalition together. A coalition adds strength to the movement as people united by a common goal emphasize communication and coordination while respecting each other. Coalitions allow organizations and individuals to participate in ways that are consistent with their unique strengths.

Understanding the roles of individuals and different organizations in a movement is a key to building a successful social movement. One organization or network of individuals cannot do everything. One individual cannot play every role. Organizations and individuals supporting each other, developing strategy and tactics together after listening to different views, creates unity. Solidarity of vision and purpose is what creates a powerful movement.

To answer the question, "What do I do?": Find your role and find your issue, then get involved either locally or at the state, national or international level. If you are already involved, then understanding how the roles contribute to the goals of the movement may make your work more effective. And whatever you do, know that you are part of a growing movement of movements that has the power to create transformational change.

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