

How does change happen?

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In several meetings I've attended over the past few months, I've had the opportunity to hear veteran organizers and activists reflect on this question, which is at the heart of our work. Few of them operate out of a formally articulated "theory of change," although they all possess deep knowledge about what works and what doesn't.

In fact, a good number of experienced organizers would take issue with the conventional linear depiction of the change process. The environments in which they do their work are complex and constantly changing. Strategies and tactics must be frequently reassessed and adjusted in response to those shifting dynamics. Progress is not steady or predictable. "Dry spells" are inevitable, yet unexpected windows of opportunity can suddenly appear. Success may hinge on the ability to mobilize and act at a moment's notice.

If a foundation is to be a good partner in supporting social change efforts, it needs to listen to the voices of those engaged in the work and learn from them. Since we aspire to be a learning organization, one of the aims of the Marguerite Casey Foundation is to provide opportunities for our grantees to critically reflect on their experience. It is also important to help capture those lessons and share them in order to stimulate dialogue and mutual learning. What follows are some preliminary thoughts about the process of community change, gleaned from the observations of seasoned practitioners.

Much has been written on this topic. This is not a scholarly treatise or an attempt to articulate a comprehensive formal theory. Rather, it is simply a collection of practice-tested ideas, presented for your scrutiny and reactions. Just as we are discussing these ideas within the foundation to see how they might inform our work, we encourage you to do the same. We welcome your comments.

Before change can happen, the development of **critical consciousness** is essential. A significant number of individuals (it can initially be a small group) moves from a place of not knowing or denial to awareness that change is desirable and necessary. There are a variety of ways to activate that awareness. One is popular education, pioneered by Paulo Friere and others. It meets people where they are, building on their observations of the conditions of their lives to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power, injustice and individual rights.

Critical to this process is the **language** that is used. It must speak directly to the reality of the people in simple and specific terms, not abstractions. It should serve to connect them and inspire confidence, not intimidate, exclude or diminish potential participation by default.

Participants must then move beyond awareness to a **shared belief that change is possible**. They must reject passivity or defeatist thinking to embrace the potential of their own voice and power to make a difference. What helps to animate that shift is a **shared image of an achievable goal**. What change is being sought? How will things

be different? What will constitute victory? It's important to agree on what is "enough," recognizing that fixation on the ideal can constitute a barrier to success.

Leadership is key at this point, as it is throughout the process. It should directly engage participants in decision making and ensure representation of differing points of view. It should also be capable of "crossing boundaries" of race, class, gender, ideology and other traditional lines of demarcation and separation to get the job done. It should reinforce the collective nature of social change yet be capable of decisive action when opportunities present themselves. While drawing on the wisdom of local elders, it should also incorporate and benefit from the vitality and energy of youthful participants rather than merely consigning them to peripheral roles.

Leadership is also critical to the articulation of a **call to action** that lays out in simple and compelling terms the moral and spiritual underpinnings of the change effort. What do we believe? What core principles underlie this campaign? Why is it essential that we commit ourselves to this cause? As participants embrace this message, they take the critical step of **taking personal responsibility** for making change happen and making a commitment to action in concert with others.

Galvanizing that personal and collective commitment into effective action requires an agreed upon **strategy** for organizing and mobilization. The formulation of that strategy encompasses **agreements and alliances** with others whose contributions can make a critical difference. Too often, insufficient attention is paid to the details of these relationships, which can ultimately lay the groundwork for success...or failure. Mechanisms need to be in place to help allied parties hold each other accountable for the fulfillment of the agreements they forge.

There are also practical needs. It is important to have an appropriate and welcoming **space to gather together**. Simultaneous **translation** capabilities may be essential to engage participants who do not share the same primary language. Participants also need **training** to help assure their effectiveness, whether in door-to-door canvassing and recruitment or testifying in public meetings or dealing with the media. Other resources are useful to support key staff, underwrite events, and fund critical activities such as data gathering and strategic communications. In short, **organizations** with adequately funded infrastructure are critically important to help initiate and sustain successful change efforts.

The most effective change efforts also make the time for periodic "check ins" to **assess and reflect** on the actions taken. It's critical to undertake a regular, rigorous, non-defensive examination of what's working and what needs to be rethought and revamped. Part of what makes this process powerful is also taking time to **celebrate** the contributions of participants, recounting challenges and successes and invoking the underlying spirit of the enterprise, perhaps via poetry, music, dance or other forms of group performance.

Spirituality is a frequently unacknowledged aspect of social action in the United States, yet it has been essential to movements of people of color around the world in settings as diverse as South Africa, Haiti, and India. It underpinned the Civil Rights movement and continues to inspire many in the global movement for peace. Faith-based organizing is a potent force across many issue areas affecting low-income families.

Although an open discussion of spirituality and activism may make some uncomfortable, I have observed a growing emergence of spirituality in contemporary social change efforts, and see it as an asset. Just as articulating a moral call to action can be essential for mobilization, consciously affirming spirituality throughout the course of a campaign can serve as a potent motivator and wellspring of renewal and reinvigoration for participants. It takes **fortitude and patience** to sustain activism over an extended period against powerful adversaries.

Ultimately, change happens in myriad ways, and local context and history clearly play an important role in shaping strategy and outcomes. No short essay or abbreviated list of factors can do justice to the topic, but these ideas resonate with my personal experience as a funder of this work. While the Foundation is not seeking (or expecting) a simple template for action, we do plan to continue to learn from the experience of our grantees, their allies and others engaged in social change work around the world. By supporting organizations that are testing these ideas in practice, we hope to be instrumental to encouraging learning across groups and individuals that will ultimately help nurture and sustain a movement of low-income families.

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