

Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | JUNE 23, 2017 · 8:30 AM

The Practice of Social Movement Leadership

By [Marshall Ganz](#) & [Liz McKenna](#)

We were delighted to read the recent [essay dialogue](#) on leadership in social movements. The contributions reflect renewed—and much-needed—empirical and theoretical engagement with the topic. Leadership (and leadership development) are key mechanisms by which people transform the individual resources they have into the collective power they need to get what they want. Leadership is thus central to movement efficacy at individual, communal, and institutional levels. Indeed, the most significant measure of social movement “impact” may be less in the accomplishment of short-term campaign outcomes than in the long-term development of the leadership and collective capacity required to achieve institutional change.

More than a decade ago, Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg argued that the dearth of leadership studies in social movements is due, in part, to the field’s longstanding structure-versus-agent divide. “Social movement activity,” they wrote, “is not a residual activity deducible from political and economic structures” ([2002, 41](#)). We agree. Neglect of the study of leadership is part of a larger failure to recognize the critical role of agency in the emergent, creative, and possibilistic phenomenon that is a social movement.

In addition, we’ve noticed that the literature tends to conflate *structure* and *authority with leadership*. As others have noted in the forum, authority and leadership may be co-incident but are not necessarily covalent. On the one hand, people who wield formal authority may or may not exercise leadership that enables others to work together in the effective pursuit of a shared purpose (Ganz [2000, 2010](#))—a distinction acknowledged in the work of Reger and Staggenborg ([2006](#)), Andrews, et al ([2010](#)) and Ahlquist and Levi ([2013](#)). Conversely, as Jo Freeman [warned in 1970](#), and Kelsy Kretschmer reminds us [here](#), movement participants may reject formal structures of authority but still rely on self-appointed leaders who make decisions about the movement in anti-democratic ways. Because of these ambiguities, a great deal of research examines leadership as a byproduct of the structures in which it is embedded (or which it eschews). A more fruitful line of inquiry would be to examine how leadership is *practiced*—as well as the extent to which these practices are shared, as Matt Baggetta observes [here](#).

Five leadership practices

What does it mean to operationalize the practice of leadership—that is, what leaders actually *do*—in the context of social movements? A framework we propose in the forthcoming edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly McCammon) and summarize below draws on a pedagogy of leadership practice developed by Marshall Ganz and colleagues (Ganz and Lin [2012](#)). It integrates social movement experience with social science research in a focus on practices that combine conceptual (theoretical), motivational (values), and behavioral (skills) elements. In this framework, we conceive of social movement leadership as exercised through five interdependent practices:

1. **Relationship building:** A foundational social movement leadership practice is recruiting individual participants by building relationships with them. This goes beyond mobilizing individuals to join through transactions of resources and interest by requiring commitment to future engagement, most often rooted in the experience of shared values. Collective capacity, in turn, can be built from the trust, learning, and solidarity growing out of the formation of affiliative horizontal relationships that enable the development of shared interests, the construction of shared resources, and the commitment to use them. Relationship building is strategic in that we know that “strong” (homogeneous) relational ties facilitate trust, motivation, and commitment, while “weak” (heterogeneous) ties broaden access to salient information, skills, and learning (Granovetter [1973](#)). Successful social movement leadership must combine both (Ganz [2000](#)).
2. **Narrative:** Movement leadership develops narrative as a way to access, express, and cultivate emotional resources embedded in shared values—resources that are necessary to confront challenges with courage, resilience, and agency. Through narrative, the motivational values that define individual identity, group identity, and an urgent need to act can be experientially articulated as a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, or “public narrative” (Ganz [2009](#), [2011](#)). Narrative can enable the empathetic experience to link leaders with participants, participants with each another, and both with broader public values at stake. Social movement leadership in particular requires learning how to use narrative to access sources of resilience—and of hope—in the face of often frequent reverses along the way to success (Voss [1996](#), Beckwith [2015](#)). Leaders in the farmworkers movement, for example, connected their personal narratives with broader narratives rooted in the experience of farm worker life, Mexican cultural traditions, Roman Catholic religious practice, and elements of the civil rights and labor movements. These stories linked Mexican immigrants with Mexican Americans as well as a broader base of public support.

Narrative is distinct from what is commonly described as *framing* in the social movements literature because it uses story not only to articulate pathways from the *world as it is* to *the world as it should be*, but also because it can spark the motivation to act on it. In the spirit of St. Augustine, it is one thing “to know the good” but quite another to “love it.” Loving it is what enables action upon it (Ganz [2001](#)). As with relationship building, crafting public narrative is an empirically observable leadership practice.

3. **Strategy:** While narrative draws on one’s emotional resources for the exercise of agency, strategizing draws more heavily on one’s cognitive resources for the analytic, imaginative, and adaptive capacity to figure out how to respond to challenges with intentionality. Strategy is the practice of turning the resources you have into the power you need to get what you want (Ganz [2010](#)). Given the highly uncertain environments in which social movements operate (Jansen [2016](#)), successful strategizing is an ongoing adaptive practice—something movement leaders *do*, not something they *have*.

Because social movements often challenge actors with abundant traditional resources like wealth, status, expertise, and political power, leaders must find ways to compensate with greater resourcefulness. Doing so requires an integrated analysis of “the whole” (mountain top) with highly particular knowledge of a specific context (the valley). Combining both, often in the form of a leadership team, is vital for effective strategizing. Since much movement activity is decentralized, unpredictable, and often requires agile responses, strategic capacity must be widely distributed rather than concentrated in a strategy team that is removed from the rank-and-file implementation. High motivation, access to diverse sources of salient knowledge, and deliberative venues committed to learning facilitate this leadership practice (Ganz [2000](#)).

4. **Structure:** It may be tempting to reduce study of social movement leadership to more easily quantifiable variables, such as the number of formally elected or appointed leaders, or how many hours they devote to the cause. Operationalizing leadership in this way, however, obscures the work of leadership in structuring processes of decision making, accountability, and coordination in ways that scaffold further leadership development (Ahlquist and

Levi [2013](#)). In the absence of such structuring, the chaotic meetings, opaque decision-making, and lack of follow-through that Freeman describes—or, a highly-militarized structure that centralizes all strategizing in the hands of a few commanders—results in an incapacity to respond to internal and external threats and opportunities with strategic information, intentionality, and creativity.

Well-designed, interdependent leadership teams are one way to avoid stucturelessness on the one hand, and the fragility and narrowness of a relying on a single person who holds all authority on the other. Without the ongoing development of tiers of leadership deep within a constituency, two things may happen: 1) the work of strategizing may be usurped by a small (often increasingly isolated) core of participants; or 2) fragmented groups may act incoherently—and sometimes at cross-purposes. In either case, both the scale and impact of a movement are compromised. Broader questions of movement structuring as a leadership practice might ask how—and where—strategizing actually occurs, as well as the extent to which leadership development is distributed.

5. **Action:** To transform individual resources into collective power, it is not enough to build relationships, tell stories, devise strategy, and enact structure. Resources like time, money, and commitment must first be mobilized to a common effort and then deployed through diverse tactics—including, but not limited to mass mobilizations (Marwell et al. [1988](#)). For moments of protest to turn into powerful movements, tactical action must be strategic, focused, and well-executed—whether a picket line, strike, direct action, boycott, or voter turnout operation.

Since most movements rely on people-based voluntary resources, learning how to secure sustained commitment of these resources while asking participants to take (sometimes very) costly tactical action is a key leadership challenge. Ineffective, disorganized, and poorly-executed actions undermine the sustained motivation necessary to keep the movement moving forward. As Jane McAlevey describes in her analysis of “structure tests,” each action is both an opportunity to develop leadership and to discern the extent to which leadership truly engages their constituency ([2016](#), Chapter 2).

While the fifth leadership practice focuses on *mobilizing* (and deploying) resources, unless it is embedded with the first four practices of *organizing*, its strategic effect is usually limited. As those who mobilized the people to fill Tahrir Square to bring down Mubarak discovered, it was organized groups that then turned that revolutionary moment into power for their own movement.

Taken together, we think these five practices offer a concrete and useful way to study and carry out the essential work that leadership does in social movements.

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2 responses to “*The Practice of Social Movement Leadership*”

Chip Berlet

September 17, 2017 at 3:20 PM



Not surprisingly these five leadership practices (and a few more on diversity and process) have been used at leadership trainings in the progressive movement for decades. Groups such as the Highlander Center, Center for New Community, Western States Center, Political Research Associates, the National LGBTQ Task Force, Showing Up for Racial Justice, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance follow this advice, and supplement it with briefings on right-wing ideology, strategies, and tactics. As well, there are periodic national conferences where staff researchers and movement leaders get together to review Right-Wing ideology, strategies, and tactics. Two examples:

Creating Change:

<https://www.creatingchange.org/rfp-guidelines/>

and this training slideshow I did for the National Domestic Workers Alliance

<http://www.progressivemovements.us/get/slideshows/study/ndwa-web.pdf>



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wilnewlv

December 13, 2018 at 5:58 AM



Thank you for the informative study. I am working on a concept for a framework for organizational leadership and found relevance in your study. If you would like to contribute your thoughts to my study please contact me.



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