The Stairway Model to Social and Political Change

By: Ned Howey

Why we developed the Stairway Model

We designed the stairway model to reflect the realities of what we are hearing from clients - and their expressed needs to identify tactics and tools that will be useful in achieving not just a single victory, but truly make fundamental change. The model seeks to find opportunities in all of the elements (budget, fundraising, lists size, social media reach etc.) that will help parties and organizations incorporate the cultivation of supporters' relationships to facilitate what we believe to power real change: people power. These relationships, when cultivated correctly, can provide a base of people capacitated for community leadership and ultimately achieve change.

DYNAMIC STRATEGY

Social and Political Change

Tools
Select those appropiate and specific and use them effectively

Tactics
Select those appropiate and specific and use them effectively

Resource Development
To maintain, sustain and scale operations

Leadership + Human Capacity
That will inspire and invest in the involvement and empowerment of others

**Supporter Relationships** of mutual accountability

How to read the model

The model aims to show all the elements we believe are necessary for impact change. Our intention is to demonstrate relationships between elements. The model's elements should be built simultaneously. We believe all these elements need to be present to allow the ascension of an organization to create change in their day to day work.

The base of this model is Leadership and Human capacity - this should always serve as the base and be the main foundation from which organizations should grow towards change.

The model illustrates that Supporter relationships should be a result of various things we do. We use the term 'supporters' here broadly to speak of constituents, members, activists etc. That said, we don't mean to just speak of any kind of supporters. Those whom we are referring to here are defined by relationships that are built (including between them), the level of commitment to each other, and the willingness to stand for themselves and together in critical moments resulting in the building of power.

We do not intend to construe that these elements should be built sequentially, while we acknowledge the form of a stairway could easily be read this way. Rather, we aim to communicate that all of these elements must be present and developed simultaneously- and especially that of deeper relationships to constituents - to allow for social change to be achieved through a strategically dynamic response of leaders to a volatile world.
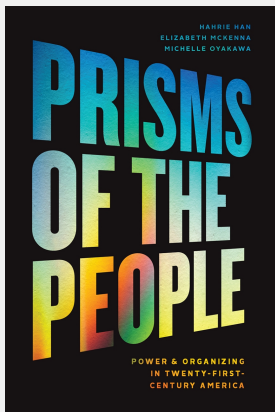
This past year social researchers and authors Hahrie Han, Liz McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa released "Prisms of the People: Organizing and Power and 21st Century America", one of the most important and groundbreaking works on people-powered social change.

In their research, they studied the commonalities behind organizations that were actually successful in making change and found the underlying element was actually around the type of relationship organizations developed with supporters.

"When we began the project, we thought we might find patterns in the types of plans deployed. Instead, we found that the leaders in our cases shared a strategic dynamism and a clarity about sustaining that dynamism. **There was no clear formula for power, no tactic, tool, resource, or action that would guarantee success. (...) What was common was a strategic logic about how to cultivate people as effective sources of power and stay accountable to them when wielding power in the public domain."**

The researchers aren't arguing that tactics or tools or resources don't have any role. They claim that the key element in all cases where change was made was the strategic logic about cultivating people as the base of power.

The realities of **Tactics, Tools, and Resources** are important for this model as well. Fundraising has a value - we have to pay for staff, vendors, tools, offices. Mailing lists have value as well as they drive people towards actions. However, strengthening those elements without a greater depth of relationship between people proves to be powerless. **Resources alone do not make fundamental change. Many organizations gather massive resources and make no change**. And in fact, there is little direct relationship between the two.

The important thing we seek to frame in the Stairway model, is that while there may not be one perfect tool or tactic, or resource, these elements work together. Those with strong supporter relationships are more likely to use their capacity of people to strengthen resource development and the power of tactics. By dedicating a strategic focus on supporter relationships - rather than implying the abandonment of resource development, tactics and tools - we can find its conscious integration into all activities.

The Opportunity As We See It

In each opportunity to develop a resource through people, there is also the opportunity to reach beyond and develop a relationship of greater depth. Operationally, this is where the stairway model holds the most value. Beyond abandoning the day to day necessities of pragmatic operational needs of an organization, **it offers a strategic logic for building relationships through regular activities where supporters are engaged.**

In every step we should be looking for the next opportunity for deeper engagement. There are many models for understanding these levels of engagement, among them the ladder of engagement, the pyramid, the onion and the circle models.

The Power is found in the capacity of people

We believe, and a great deal of research supports this, that fundamental changes are achieved when we approach social and political change with people as the primary driver of our efforts. In the stairway model, it is quite intentional that the base of the entire structure is that of human capacity (and the role leadership itself can have). Without this component of people, none of the other elements can be supported.

While having a base of supporters is essential to providing a sense of political legitimacy for advancing an agenda, this is only one aspect of the core value that involving people brings to the table. This is why mobilizing techniques like petitions are quite short sighted and rarely effective at making deeper change. Yes, you can show people support something but there are fundamental aspects of the value that humans bring that are being ignored in just showing a list of names and not nurturing deeper involvement.

What Leadership Really Means?

It is this element of *leading others* that offers an essential value to scaling and growing people-based efforts and unleashing movement-power. And it is an organizational focus on capacitation of this leadership that makes community organizing powerful within making change.

Often successful change efforts start with an individual leader - Obama, Macron, Greta Thunburg. The charisma and personalities of these leaders to personify the values of a cause itself has huge driving power - so much so that they can sometimes propel things forward at first without the development of deeper support relationships and the empowerment of other leaders. However, **all the leaders who have truly achieved change have at some point been able to do so because they have invested in the involvement, empowerment, and leadership of others.** Which is why the concept of community leadership is so fundamentally important.

The power of community leadership doesn't come from just amplifying one personality, but in building deep bonds between members of a group. This enables the fundamental ability to stand together and create change. It is not new tech innovations that will save us. It is the human capacity for creativity, insight, vision, community strength, and leadership. It is the power underlying movements united in action. Organizing is powerful because it is transformative to individuals and communities.

Click here to see a full version of this article in our blog.

Sign up for the Tectonica Organizing Network