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What are movements, why do they matter, and can you be part of one?

From Refugees Welcome to the rise of the “alt-right”, mass campaigns are a force for change in today’s fast-moving world. Kirsty McNeill, Executive Director of Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns at Save the Children, looks at the lessons campaigning and fundraising organisations can take from the rise of popular movements.

This paper is taken from a longer discussion at ‘The Most Important Meal of the Day’ on 26 January, one of a series of breakfast meetings organised by More Partnership to explore frontier issues in fundraising.

The idea of the “movement” seems to be a very modern phenomenon. Barack Obama came to power on the back of the ‘Yes we can’ movement. Donald Trump’s election victory can be seen as part of a wider social conservatism movement in the US. Then there are the recent mass protests including Black Lives Matter, Refugees Welcome and the Women’s March.

But movement-building is not new. In fact, it’s something our species has been engaged with for a very long time. Whether it’s the movements for temperance, for women’s suffrage or the abolition of slavery, we have a longstanding heritage in the UK and elsewhere of thinking through a movement prism.

But what does it mean to be a movement builder?

I think of myself in that movement-building tradition – by my identity, orientation and profession. But I attach no moral weight to that whatsoever. Movement building is a technique and a way of being that is morally neutral. The far right are also movement builders. So are ISIS.

So let us not assume that movements are inherently good or inherently new. That said, I think there are some very good things that people of good heart and good conscience can draw from the movement mentality.

The 3D Era

We can characterise the time we’re living in with 3 Ds: distrust, disruption and division.

First, there is distrust of institutions of all kinds: of parliament, borne out of the expenses crisis; of the media, from the hacking scandal; of banks and business, because of the financial crash; and now of charities, rooted, in part, in some of the scandals we’ve experienced as a sector, but more generally in a baseline scepticism among the public today over whether institutions can be trusted to do what they say they’re going to do.

Secondly, this era is also characterised by disruption. Across all sectors there are new ways of thinking, doing and being that make this time one of profound insecurity and destabilisation. It is also a time of enormous creativity and opportunity, but many ordinary people are not quite sure where the next change to their life is coming from.

Thirdly, across many of the ‘pacesetter’ countries including Britain and the US, publics are profoundly and evenly divided. There are very deep divisions between people of different opinions, which we have seen electorally with Trump and Brexit. People are also deeply divided by background. There is a deep sense that we no longer know one another. Educational and geographical splits may make us feel that we are no longer part of the same society, community or family.

But what does this have to do with movements? I believe that a movement mentality is a particularly helpful way of responding to these 3 Ds. Movements can tackle distrust because of their perceived authenticity. They can outpace the sense of disruption, because they are always in motion, and always looking for the next agile thought. And they can tackle division by bringing people together. There is no movement of one.

Can your organisation be part of a movement?

If you believe there is something for you and your work in this idea of being a movement thinker and a movement builder, there are three tests you can apply to see whether you really mean it.

1. **Are you willing to subsume your identity and attract people through the “work” rather than your brand?**

Movement building rests on someone’s sense of identity. This means it’s about who they are, not what they do. If you look at people who are builders of movements or part of movements, their Twitter bio can be revealing. They will often say something like: “feminist, anti-fascist, environmentalist, humanitarian”. What they do not say is: “supporter of the Fawcett Society, supporter of Hope Not Hate, supporter of WWF, supporter of MSF or Save the Children”.

An identity mindset acknowledges that the cause comes first. The loyalty is always first and foremost to the work, not to the organisation or institution that enables the work. So if you are putting yourself front and centre and not the beneficiaries, the mission, or the bigger picture, you probably don’t have a movement mindset yet.

The other side of that is that movements are characterised by being “mass”. If it doesn’t have large numbers of the mainstream public involved, it’s not really a movement worthy of the name. However, there are plenty of brands and organisations that have mass participation but don’t pass the threshold of being a “movement” because they don’t speak to someone’s sense of identity. For example, Uber may be entirely disruptive and hugely popular, but no one says: “I’m a user of Uber!” It’s just something they do, not something they are.

2. **Are you willing to be part of something that has many leaders, from different organisations?**

In a movement, there are many places where leadership emerges. Some of my movement-building colleagues in the States say that the question to a room full of potential supporters is never: “Who wants to be in charge?” but rather “Who wants to get to work?” Leadership will identify itself through action.

For example, I have no idea who led the Women’s March after Donald Trump was elected, and it’s not because I’m not interested. I don’t know who started the Refugees Welcome movement, but I know I’m part of it and I know I’m one of the leaders – just not the leader.

These leader-full movements are characterised by weak governance but strong ties. You won’t find one great orchestrating committee or central website. But you will find, at the founding moments of these movements, a group of people with pre-existing strong social capital. They tend to know and trust one another, and recognise the strengths that each of them bring. So building your social capital is a pre-requisite for being a future movement builder, where you see yourself as part of an ecosystem of leadership, rather than a top-down hierarchy.

The second thing about leader-full movements is that they are characterised by being “non-zero-sum”. This requires a shift in mindset from having “competitors” to “partners”. For example, I’m part of the humanitarian movement. When MSF does well, I say “God speed!”. When Oxfam makes a great hire, I’m delighted. It’s not zero sum when good people join our movement and start to flex their leadership muscles. That makes us all stronger – if we really have a movement mindset.

3. Are you happy giving people control over what their support looks and feels like?

Most movements are characterised by a strong DIY element. This is best explained with one quite personal example. In June 2016, my friend the MP Jo Cox was murdered. Suddenly, a group of people who knew her, and who had strong ties and pre-existing social capital, were inundated with requests from people around the world who wanted to honour her legacy.

That happened on a Thursday. By the following Wednesday we had a global mobilisation that stretched from 15,000 people in Trafalgar Square to a tree-planting session in Kenya, and from a special session of the UN to – and I still can’t quite believe this happened – a vigil in Syria.

None of us could have come up with that range of tactics and activities on our own. What we did was provide a platform. We said: “We will take your outpouring of goodwill and channel it back to you, and you activate in a way that makes most sense for you and your context”.

We just gave a few guard rails: please do it on the Wednesday, her 42nd birthday; please make it about “more in common”, from her maiden speech in Parliament; and please don’t make it political. We said: “Those are the guard rails – now go off and do what you like”.

Are you happy with this DIY approach, which lends itself to all kinds of creativity, sustainable and authentic engagement? Are you happy for engagement to be led by loyalty to the work, not a brand or communications strategy? Are you really happy to let go?

And a final thought...

This approach to movements can perhaps be best summed up in one sentence: a willingness to submerge your interests and organisational identity may actually be, in the end, the best way to strengthen and serve your interests and identity.

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She has advised the senior leadership of some of the world’s leading charities, including Amnesty International, Oxfam, Stonewall, Teach First and UNICEF. She was a senior Special Adviser to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and in 2005 was on the board of Make Poverty History, writing the coalition’s flagship policy report and leading the delivery of a rally of 250,000 people in Edinburgh. At the same time, she managed the Stop AIDS Campaign, successfully negotiating a commitment to universal access to AIDS treatment from the G8.