



Leadership Roles Within an Advocacy Movement

At the Advocacy and Leadership Center, we have spent more than a decade searching out the secrets of successful social change movement leadership. In books and case studies and in our daily interaction with stunningly diverse movement leaders, we've struggled to find guidance to help strengthen the leadership capacity of emerging community leaders. One way has been to develop an informal "taxonomy" of the leadership roles that seem essential to the success of a citizen movement. That taxonomy is rather loose, its categories shade into one another, a single leader may well embody a handful of the leadership roles, and we keep constantly revising it as we learn more about the movements we work with and observe.

Ideally, a movement must have a plurality of leaders, filling a cabinet of distinct, yet complementary, leadership roles. By utilizing a diverse cabinet of leaders, a movement develops a powerful dynamic that strengthens and emboldens, bringing the movement closer to optimum gains and successes.

The current version of the leadership taxonomy includes Visionaries, Strategists, Statespersons, Experts, Outside Sparkplugs, Inside Advocates, Strategic Communicators, Movement Builders, Generalists, Historians, and Cultural Activists.

Leaders who make up the leadership taxonomy each bring to the movements they serve a special skill set. Visionaries raise our view of the possible. Strategists chart the vision and achieve what's attainable. Statespersons elevate the cause in the minds of both the public and decision-makers. Experts wield knowledge to back up the movement's positions. Outside Sparkplugs goad and energize, fiercely holding those in power to account. Inside Advocates understand how to turn power structures and established rules and procedures to advantage. Strategic Communicators deploy the rhetoric to intensify and direct public passion toward the movement's objectives. Movement Builders generate optimism and good will, infecting others with dedication to the common good. Generalists anchor a movement, grounded in years of experience. Historians uphold a movement's memory, collecting and conveying its stories. Cultural Activists pair movements with powerful cultural forces. The happy confluence of each of these leadership roles is the hallmark of a successful movement.

- **Visionaries.** Movements take flight through visionaries. Visionaries lift the horizons of others, setting goals that have never before been imagined or seen as realistic. Visionaries challenge the conventional view of the possible, aim high, take risks, and rethink priorities.
- **Strategists.** Strategists sort out that part of the vision that is realistically attainable, and develop a road map to get there. Strategists anticipate obstacles, including those laid by

unruly coalition members, and provide guidance to insure that the movement remains headed in the right direction.

- **Statespersons.** Statespersons carry the movement flag. They are the “larger than life” public figures that embody authority and trust. Statespersons radiate credibility for the movement far beyond its core supporters.
- **Experts.** Experts ensure that all new discoveries and public policy positions are well reasoned and grounded in facts. They possess special skills and knowledge that lend credibility to and back up the positions.
- **Outside Sparkplugs.** Sparkplugs are agitators: unabashed tellers of truth to power. They operate outside of conventional, political (or other) establishments, free of the ties that bind “inside” players, and capable of holding our governments and other established organizations up to their own rhetoric of mission and commitment. Sparkplugs can kick-start a movement or coalition and keep energy flowing through it. A community may be concerned, even outraged, but it may not be moved to action without a fiery goad. Sparkplugs are often irritating and difficult, but they churn up our collective conscience and annoy us into action.
- **Inside Advocates.** Inside Advocates are wise in the ways of the political process, they are skilled negotiators, and positioned to influence key policy makers. Inside Advocates occupy seats of power or establish an open door to them, intuit the approaches and arguments that resonate with policy makers, and press them in ways that are not easily dismissed.
- **Strategic Communicators.** Strategic Communicators are public teachers, masters of the “sound bite” as the concentrated encapsulation of potent messages. They translate complex scientific data, complex public policy, and basic concepts of truth and justice into accurate, powerful metaphorical messages, the significance of which can be instantly grasped by the broad public.
- **Movement Builders.** The quiet heroes of any successful movement, Movement Builders reach out to draw in new allies; they recruit new activists and make them feel welcome, valued, and heeded. They do the same for longtime movement members as well. They know that a movement is weakest when it shuns diversity and seeks only a narrow, homogeneous base. Builders bridge generations, link local with national, even international advocacy, create space for the knowledge gained through experience to be passed on, and initiate new approaches to participation so diverse voices are heard and their demands heeded. Builders also heal. They circumvent organizational turf hurdles, they convene and facilitate, seek to explore differences through civil discourse and debate, and eschew rancorous division.

- **Generalists.** Generalists bring multi-layered skills to the effort, often cultivated through many years of experience. They see a movement's activities from many sides, and can turn their hand to many tasks. Generalists model and live out the ideals of a movement, integrating them into their day-to-day perspective.
- **Historians.** Historians are keepers of the movement's memory, bringing to bear the learning of past experience. They recount the history of relationships with partners and key players, as well as the history and evolution of the issue itself over time. They ensure that activists benefit from the hard-won lessons of those who came before them. Historians provide activists with a sense of their legacy, an honor of and obligation to the past, which renews the call for continued action in the present, and the hope of leaving a new generation of lessons and accomplishments for the future. They are the teachers, torchbearers, and conscience for a movement.
- **Cultural Activists.** Cultural Activists use cultural preservation, history, and activism to sustain movements. They are public opinion leaders, trusted insider figures whom members of a cultural community tend to believe and follow. They build bridges between the movement's actions and powerful cultural meaning, interpreting back and forth between them in a way that strengthens both.