

Key Components of a Successful Social Movement: Civil Rights Movement as Example by [Kathy Emery](#)

A Successful Social Movement = The coordination of a variety of membership organizations that effect a fundamental paradigm shift. For this to happen, the following components must be in place (see paragraphs below for explanations of each component):

- o identifying the problem
- o doing your homework (research)
- o personal relationship and community building,
- o building an infrastructure,
- o development of local leadership, creating organizations
- o creating coalitions,
- o strategic use of the arts,
- o ***strategic use*** of nonviolent direct resistance, (***must be strategic!!***)
- o learning how to deal with the contradictions within the movement,
- o and being in the right historical moment (includes liberal political leadership)

Identifying the problem: The history books have marginalized the Southern Freedom Movement to being merely a Civil Rights Movement. At the time, however, all those engaged in the struggle called it the Freedom Movement. There were Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer and Freedom Schools. Civil rights (being able to vote, sit where you want in public places) were a means to a larger end -- freedom. Freedom meant dignity (“I am a man!”) - to be treated as a human being. Most of the freedom fighters saw their struggle as an international human rights struggle, identifying with the anti-colonial movements simultaneously occurring in Africa and Asia (much like the Arab Spring and Occupy are part of a new reawakening). The **problems** that **organizers learned** from the people **that would motivate** the community to engage in a variety of kinds of protest were: segregation of public facilities; disenfranchisement (voter suppression); inadequate education; state sanctioned terrorism; underemployment and unemployment. African Americans in the South were particularly exploited through discriminatory distribution of federal farm subsidies and cheated by landowners of their share of the crop profits. Another serious problem was the mechanization of cotton production putting hundreds and thousands of sharecroppers and wage laborers out of work. Ultimately (by ~1966) most freedom activists (well, at least, SNCC) had realized that the problem was lack of self-determination, hence the call for and working towards BLACK POWER.

Research leading to an accurate power structure analysis, thereby strategic use of NVR:

This allows organizers to develop effective strategies to achieve their goals. For example, Martin Luther King sent James Lawson to Nashville because they believed the city contained the right combination of variables to have effective nonviolent direct action. Through their research, they figured out: (1) the black ministry was supportive of NVR; (2) the newspaper would report the civil disobedience fairly enough for media attention to be effective; (3) there were four black colleges from which to recruit; (4) there was a critical mass of black middle class shoppers for a

boycott to be effective. See episode I from DVD, *A Force More Powerful*, “When We Were Warriors” for more details.

Strategic use of the arts to inspire hope, create community, and draw people into the action
A symbol is worth a thousand words. Singing was essential to the success of the Civil Rights movement in several ways: (1) when a group of activists were surrounded by police or thugs who threatened violence or death, the act of singing a civil rights song dissipated the activists’ fears, allowing them to persevere in their action. (2) According to Bruce Hartford, singing is to chanting on a picket line as an elephant is to a mouse – singing draws people in/chanting alienates people; one can sing for a lot longer than one can chant; songs tell a story (educate/inspire) and the words can be heard further away than yelling.

Strategic use of nonviolent resistance (NVR) (see [B. Hartford’s essays @ crmvet.org](#))
Nonviolent direct action was used *tactically* during the Civil Rights movement. While a few like King and Rustin believed in it as a *philosophy*, most of the young college students who put their bodies on the line did so because of the belief that violence would be impractical, would not work, because the power structure had more guns than they did. This is to say, many of the same students who participated in a nonviolent co-ordinated action would also engage in self-defense outside the context of a nonviolent action. These students participated in NVR because the purpose of such an action was to increase the participation in the movement. For example, the purpose of the sit-ins in Nashville was to engage the middle class black population in a boycott of downtown stores in order to put pressure on the owners to desegregate their establishments.

To be ***strategic***, an action needs to be designed to answer, at least, the following questions:

1. How will the action dramatize the injustice you want to change?
2. How is it designed to gain the sympathy of a wider audience (and do you have a variety of tasks ready to assign for the expected number of recruits who will want to join when they see or hear about your action?)
3. How is your action part of a larger, long-range plan? Can you articulate that plan?
4. What has your research told you to anticipate as the reaction against your action? Have you trained the participants to respond nonviolently to the anticipated reaction? How is the anticipated reaction part of your larger strategy?
5. What are the possible next steps that will increase participation and membership in your campaign (depending on which of the reactions that you expect actually occur)?

Building Infrastructure and Coalitions

The Civil Rights Movement may have occurred from 1955 - 1965 (or 1953 -73, depending on who you are talking to), but the foundations for such a movement were built long before. The anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells and others led to the creation of the Niagra Movement in 1905 that was then folded into the NAACP (1911). The NAACP had local offices mostly in the North until the 1930s when James Weldon Johnson created his Southern Empire -- local NAACP chapters in the South.

While the NAACP engaged in direct action against lynching (e.g. the Silent March of 1917), its decision to focus its energies on the overturning of *Plessy v Ferguson* in the 1930s allowed it to

develop a fear of direct action. Inspired by Gandhi, **CORE** was founded in 1942 in Chicago and used direct action to challenge segregated housing. In 1947, after the NAACP's successful suit in [*Morgan v Virginia*](#), CORE launched the Journey of Reconciliation -- a dress rehearsal for the Freedom Rides of 1961-3 -- to test the Supreme Court's decision that segregated seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional. In 1957, King organized **SCLC** as a way to direct the energies of churches towards nonviolent direct action based on his understanding of the fusion of Gandhian *satyagraha* and his Christian beliefs. At Highlander Folk School, the idea of **SNCC** took shape and then at Shaw University the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formed with the financial support of SCLC.

While the four major organizations - ***NAACP, CORE, SCLC, and SNCC*** - formed the basic infrastructure of the movement, they were supported by a variety of other important membership organizations both national and local in scope -- religious, labor, lawyers, doctors, civil rights and so forth...too many to name here. The history of the Southern Freedom Movement is the history of the interplay or coordination of these organizations in support of each other (whether they intended it or not). The most famous or extensive example of such coordination is that of Freedom Summer in 1964. To deal with the particularly difficult situation in Mississippi, the four organizations intentionally coordinated under the umbrella organization ***COFO - the Congress of Federated Organizations*** - in 1962. COFO coordinated the variety of programs that made up the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, aka Freedom Summer.

Local leadership development: leaders are those “who know the problem!”

This happened in several ways. I only describe two here:

1. Bernice Robinson went to Highlander Folk School in 1955 with Esau Jenkins (both from Johns Island, S.C.). When Jenkins began to explain his inability to win school board elections, the entire workshop began to discuss how to increase voter participation. That led to a discussion on learning to read and write in order to pass literacy tests. This led to the first Citizenship School being established. Myles Horton told Robinson that she would have to be the first teacher.

Robinson, in the movie [*You Got to Move*](#) explained how the Citizenship Schools produced local leaders that provided the “basis of the entire” movement.

We would go into communities, set up classes. If there was no community organization in that community, we would organize that first class into an organization so that we would have some influence in the community, some ongoing learning process. . . . They would say, well, we don't have a leader in our community. We say, “well what about *you* being a leader?” “They say, “no, I'm not a leader.” We say, “But *you* know the problem. *You* know what needs to be done to solve the problem.” . . . Really, [the Citizenship Schools} were the basis of the entire Civil Rights Movements . . . because people became aware of the power that was in them that they could use to get things done.

2. Ella Baker, when she worked for the NAACP in the Forties and early Fifties, traveled throughout the South getting to know the heads of the local chapters of the NAACP. When SNCC decided to go to Mississippi and launch a voter registration project in 1962, Baker was able to give Bob Moses a list of local leaders (C.C. Bryant, Amzie Moore,) through whom he could gain the trust of the local people. Mike Miller in [*one of his excellent essays*](#), explains the significance of local leaders to community organizing:

Respected local leaders introduced Bob Moses into the local communities, in which voter registration projects started, and asked the local community to financially support the voter registration work that Moses and other SNCC field secretaries were going to do. To the question that might be asked of a SNCC worker, “Who sent you?”, the answer was Webb Owens or Amzie Moore or CC Bryant or any of a number of respected local people who legitimized SNCC’s presence in their community. Where that beginning legitimacy was lacking, the SNCC worker had to earn the right to meddle by gaining the trust of locally respected people. SNCC field secretary Charles McLauren wrote a paper on invited and uninvited organizers, and what the latter had to do to earn trust, which was the precondition to engaging people in “Movement” activity.

Examples of a few of the thousands of local leaders that were the backbone of the movement:

- Birmingham: Fred Shuttlesworth (Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights) . . .
- Montgomery, AL: Jo Ann Robinson (Women’s Political Council); E.D. Nixon; Rosa Parks; Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King, Jr. . . .
- Johns Island, SC: Bernice Robinson; Esau Jenkins
- various Mississippi counties: Fannie Lou Hamer; Endesha Ida Mai Holland; Sam Block; Wazir Peacock. . . .
- Nashville, TN: Diane Nash; James Bevel; John Lewis; Bernard Lafayette. . . .

Learning how to deal with the contradictions within the movement

Every movement experiences internal tensions and divisions. Movements continue to move forward when those divisions are mitigated. Movements fall apart when those divisions create chasms. Throughout the Southern Freedom Movement, local leaders had to navigate a variety of disagreements and fundamental philosophical differences. There was the constant tension between those who were philosophically nonviolent and those who saw nonviolence as a tactic. The NAACP opposed direct action of SNCC and SCLC had to navigate between the two organizations, black women resented white women sleeping with black men; men automatically assumed leadership roles and assumed women would make the coffee. Those who opposed bringing white volunteers to Mississippi in 1964 agreed to not undermine Freedom Summer; there was constant negotiation of how to deal with Bayard Rustin’s homosexuality given that he was one of the most brilliant tacticians and organizers they had. One division that was not contained, resolved or mitigated contributed to the movement’s ultimate demise. By 1966, SNCC and the Black Panthers began to consistently demand that white SDS students organize in white communities while blacks organized in black communities. The white SDS leadership refused to heed this call. David Barber describes how this process played out in his excellent book, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and why it failed*. Today, the divisions continue to be ideological (bring the system down or reform it), financial (can we make any progress within the paradigm of the nonprofit industrial complex?), tactical (who to work with and who not to work with) racial, gendered and so on. Building a mass movement is not easy. Holding together a mass movement is even more difficult. It takes a commitment by most of the participants to articulate the differences and tensions and learn to move forward together in spite of them.

Personal relationship and community building:

In the 1950s in the South, the black towns of Mississippi and Alabama produced local leaders who could mobilize their communities because of the "shared activity" and "common consequence" of segregation and the plantation system enforced by lynchings over generations. And one of the reasons that community activists were fighting for desegregation and NOT INTEGRATION, was the desire to maintain those communities. They were fighting to eliminate the humiliation of segregation, wanted freedom of association. They were not fighting to leave their communities, abandon their values, their culture or their shared interests and relationships...their homes.

There is a wonderful scene in *Freedom Song* that captures the complexity of community. Owen, a young teenager is about to walk into the white lunch counter at the local bus station. The local leader of the NAACP youth group (the local barber named T-bone) grabs Owen and steers him to the counter of the colored lunch counter, orders him a glass of milk and tells him to start going to church, get a haircut and wait for the right moment to act, which is coming. T-bone pays for the milk and walks away. Owen mutters petulantly to the receding back of T-bone, "you ain't my dad." The waitress delivering Owen's milk responds, "honey, we's all your family."

The right historical conditions (including an enlightened administration):

The Southern Freedom Movement took off after the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-6 because it was the right moment. The anti-communist terror of the McCarthy period was over. The anti-colonial movement had announced its resolve in the Bandung Conference of 1955.

Kennedy's election in 1960 and his public commitment to spreading "Freedom" throughout the world made the Federal government extremely vulnerable to direct action like Sit Ins and Freedom Rides that exposed the government's hypocrisy to the world. Without being able to leverage federal intervention in the state policies of the deep South, it is doubtful apartheid could have been dismantled at that time. The "right historical moment" also means that it must be a time AFTER infrastructure, community and local leaders are already in place. For example, without the local NAACP chapters that James Weldon Johnson was able to engineer in the 1930s, SNCC would have had little chance of mobilizing the community for Freedom Summer in 1964.