

Eight stages of successful social movements

by Bill Moyer

Stage 1: Normal times

A problem exists but it is not on anyone's agenda and the public is unaware of it.

The Movement:

- Citizen and reformer roles.
- Use normal institutional channels and methods (lobby, vote, courts).
- Use or form conventional campaigning groups.
- Low expectations of success.
- Demonstrations are small and rare and have little power or support.

The Powerholders

- Maintain status quo and hide violations.
- "Official" policies appear to uphold society's values vs "operating" policies which violate them.
- Aim to keep the issue out of the public's mind and off the agenda.

The public

- Unaware of the problem.
- Support the powerholders/ status quo.
- Less than 15% favour policy change.

Pitfalls

- Believing the system can change the problem.
- Feeling powerless.

Goals

- Build organisations, vision and strategy.
- Document problems and powerholders' roles.
- Become informed.

Crisis (that ends this stage):

- Newly involved grassroots citizens realise that the official powerholders and old campaigning organisations do not have the power to create change through the normal system. They realise they must confront the official institutions themselves.

Stage 2: Prove failure of normal institutions

A new wave of grassroots opposition begins which must prove that the official institutions/ channels support the status quo and prevent change.

The Movement:

- Reformer/ citizen role.
- Use the official system to document that it does not justify public trust or support widely held values.
- Older campaigns and new grassroots citizens groups work together.
- New grassroots groups and national networks begin to grow.

The Powerholders

- Aim to keep the issue off the social and political agendas.
- Maintain routine bureaucratic functioning to stifle opposition.

The public

- Still unaware of the problem.
- Supports the status quo and official policies.
- Less than 20% want policy change.

Pitfalls

- Belief that change can happen through the use of normal channels alone.
- Feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness.

Goals

- Prove and document the failure of official institutions and powerholders to uphold the public trust.
- Begin legal cases to establish legal and moral basis for opposition (might win some of these later).
- Build opposition organisations, leadership, expertise.

Crisis

- Grassroots activists realise that the powerholders and normal public institutions violate the public trust and that extra-parliamentary political action is needed to create change.

Stage 3: Ripening conditions

Perceived or real worsening conditions, and/or new evidence of the severity of the problem. There is rising grassroots discontent with conditions, the institutions, powerholders and older campaigns. Upsetting events happen, including ones that encapsulate the problem.

The Movement:

- Reformer, citizen and rebel roles.
- Grassroots groups grow in number and size.
- Travelling organisers inspire opposition.
- Small nonviolent actions start
- Some of the progressive community is won over.
- Pre-existing mass-based networks and groups join the cause.

Pitfalls

- Sense of hopelessness and powerlessness.
- Lack of strategic vision.

Goals

- Educate/ win over the progressive community.
- Prepare grassroots for new movement
- More local/ small scale actions.

The Powerholders

- Still feel secure and tout policies.
- Still control institutional channels and decision-making.

Crisis

- Grassroots grow upset and frustrated with the problem and the normal system. This grows to bursting point, waiting for an event to trigger the next stage.

The public

- Still unaware of the problem.
- Supports powerholders and status quo.
- But up to 30% oppose present policies.

Stage 4: Take off

A trigger event puts a spotlight on a problem that violates widely held values, sparking public attention and upset. It precipitates massive nonviolent actions and a new grassroots-based social movement. The issue is put on society's agenda of hotly contested issues in a crisis atmosphere.

The Movement:

- Effective rebel role.
- Enact or respond to the trigger event.
- Big national rallies/ demos and hundreds of local nonviolent/ civil disobedience actions.
- A new movement is launched by direct actions.
- A new organisation is created as a vehicle for the movement.
- Informal organisation style.
- Energy and hope for quick changes.
- Older campaigns sometimes oppose rebel activities.

Pitfalls

- Unrealistic expectation of quick victory.
- Burnout from round-the-clock effort.
- Ideology of no structure/ everyone decides everything/ emerging negative rebel.
- See issue isolated from other issues.

Goals

- Put issue on society's agenda.
- Create a new grassroots movement.
- Alert, educate and win public opinion.
- Legitimise movement by emphasising and upholding widely held values.

The Powerholders

- Shocked by new opposition and publicity.
- Fail to keep the issue off society's agenda.
- Reassert official line.
- Discredit opposition.

Crisis

- Take-off stage lasts less than two years. Activists see limits of protest. Many move on to positive change process, become despairing, and move to Stage 5.

The public

- Becomes highly aware of the problem.
- 40-60% oppose current policies.

Stage 5: Perception of failure

The movement progresses to Stage 6, but many activists don't see this progress and believe their movement has failed. Numbers are down at demonstrations, there is less media coverage, and long-range goals are not met.

The Movement:

- Negative rebel and naïve citizen roles.
- Unrealistic hope of quick success is unmet; many activists despair, burn out and drop out.
- Stuck in protest mode, act on anger and despair.
- Try to be more militant.

The Powerholders

- Official line is 'the movement has failed'.
- Discredit movement by highlighting and encouraging 'negative rebel' activities, including agents provocateurs.

The public

- Alienated by movement's negative rebels.
- Fear and distrust negative rebel actions; many ordinary people drop out or don't join.

Pitfalls

- Unable to see movement's success.
- Activist burnout and exhaustion.
- Rambo-style actions of anger and violence.
- Become a permanent counter-culture sect that is isolated and ineffective.

Goals

- Recognise movement progress and success.
- Recognise that the movement is in Stage 6 and choose an appropriate role.
- Counter negative rebel tendencies.

Crisis

Ends when activists see movement progress and join Stage 6; or join the take-off stage of a new movement or sub-movement.

Stage 6: Majority public opinion

The movement transforms from protest in crisis to long-term struggle with powerholders to win public majority to oppose current policies and consider positive alternatives. The movement's position is increasingly adopted by mainstream society.

The Movement:

- Social change agent role.
- Broaden analysis, pluralism, form coalitions.
- Many new groups, including mainstream, involved and doing much grassroots education.
- Use normal channels, eg voting – some success.
- Nonviolent actions at key times and places.
- 'Citizen involvement' programmes, eg citizen diplomacy and fair trade/ nuclear-free/ local agenda 21 towns.
- Many sub-goals and campaigns.

The Powerholders

- Try to discredit and disrupt movement.
- Demonology – create public fear of alternatives.
- Promote new strategies and programmes.
- Promote bogus reforms and peace processes.
- Create crisis events to scare public.
- Become more split.

The public

- Increasingly favour alternatives.
- Backlash and counter-movements.
- Increasing majority (60-75%) against current policies, but many fear alternatives.

Pitfalls

- National organisations and staff dominate movement and undercut grassroots.
- Reformers compromise too much.
- Belief that the movement is failing

Goals

- Keep issue on the agenda.
- Win over and involve majority of public.
- Activists become committed to the long haul.

Crisis

- There is a consensus for changing policies.
- The powerholders seek alternatives.

Stage 7: Achieving alternatives

This is a long process, not an event. The struggle shifts from opposing present policies to choice of alternatives to adopt. there is massive public passion for change, and it is more costly for the powerholders to continue old policies than to adopt new ones. More 're-trigger' events occur.

The Movement:

- Change agent and reformer roles.
- Wage a successful end-game process; broad-base opposition demands change.
- Counter powerholders bogus alternatives.
- Nonviolent action, when appropriate.
- Promote alternatives and a paradigm shift.

The Powerholders

- Intransigent central powerholders become isolated as most of them change.
- Central powerholders try last gambits, then have to a) change policies themselves, b) have their policies defeated by a vote, or c) lose office.

The public

- Public majority demands for change are bigger than its fears of the alternatives.
- Majority no longer believes powerholders' justifications and demonology for old policies.

Pitfalls

- Compromise too much, too soon.
- Achieve minor reform, not social change.
- Activists dismayed because they do not recognise successes and powerholders claim movement victories as their own.
- End game process is often invisible.

Goals

- Movement achieves a major goal.
- Movement achieves major goals within the framework of the paradigm shift.
- Recognise movement's success.
- Create on-going empowered activists and organisations to achieve other goals/

Crisis

- Movement wins key goal by a) dramatic showdown, b) powerholders change policies, or c) long term attrition.

Stage 8: Continuation

The movement needs to protect and extend successes that were achieved, and switches its focus to other sub-goals or movements. Its long-term focus is to achieve a paradigm shift.

The Movement:

- Reformer role.
- Follow up efforts to protect and expand successes.
- Minimise losses due to backlash.
- Circle back to other sub-goals and new issues in earlier stages

The Powerholders

- Adapt to new policies and conditions.
- Claim movement's success as their own.
- Try to roll back movement successes by not carrying out agreements or new legislation, work for new counter-legislation, or continue old policies in secret.

The public

- Adopts new consensus and status quo.
- New public beliefs and expectations are carried over to future situations, eg the Vietnam syndrome.

Pitfalls

- Win only minor reforms.
- Fail at watchdog or follow-up activities.
- People stop being activists.

Goals

- Retain and extend successes.
- Continue the struggle by promoting other issues and a paradigm shift.
- Recognise and celebrate success.
- Build on-going grassroots organisations and power bases.

Crisis

- While many activists move on to other issues and goals, Stage-8 follow-up continues indefinitely. The impact of this movement on society is on-going and greater than the achievement of the specific goal.