

Make Change

What's in it for me? Learn how to start making a real difference in the world.

Are you ready to hear some bitter truths? In the past few years, American police have shot an average of three people a day – and a disproportionate number of them were Black. Additionally, income inequality in the US has skyrocketed, the cost of healthcare has become untenable, and over half a million people are homeless. Oh, and if we don't drastically reduce emissions right now, in just a few years time it will be entirely too late to stop climate change. If you're an empathetic, informed human being in the modern world, the size and scope of our social, economic, and environmental problems can seem overwhelming. You might dream of making the world a better place. But when it comes to actually doing something about it, you may feel totally helpless. After all, what can you, a single person, do about any of these huge issues? The truth is, any successful movement for social change is made up of individuals just like you. These Blinks look into the ideas of civil rights activist Shaun King and show the tips, tools, and strategies you need to get started – and what our movements need to succeed. In these blinks, you'll learn

the single most important takeaway from human history; the three indispensable components of any successful movement; and why one win outweighs a dozen losses.

In order to understand change, you need to understand history.

The most profound insight about how the world works came to Shaun in a college class he didn't really want to take. It was 2015, and he'd just gotten more serious about his activism. Over the past few months, he'd emerged as a leading social media figure in the budding Black Lives Matter movement. But the many setbacks the movement had suffered were taking a toll on him. In November 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice had been shot in Cleveland, Ohio, for playing with a toy gun. A little later, the police officers responsible for the murder of Michael Brown and Eric Garner had been cleared of all charges. So Shaun tried to build a deeper foundation for his work by enrolling in the Master of African American Studies program at Arizona State University. Here's the key message: In order to understand change, you need to understand history. In one of his first classes, Introduction to Historiography, Shaun learned about Leopold von Ranke – a nineteenth-century German historian who'd attempted to compile a complete timeline of world history. Initially, Shaun was convinced that the theories of an old, white German man couldn't possibly provide any useful insight into modern-day activism. But Ranke's grand historical project revealed something that shook up Shaun's entire worldview. Up until then, Shaun had believed that human history was evolving toward peace and justice. But Ranke's timeline showed that history was a constant fluctuation of peaks and dips: peace and war, prosperity and famine, fascism and freedom. Reliably, progressive pushes to make the world a better place were followed by conservative backlash. For instance, when Black people enjoyed a brief period of relative freedom after the Civil War, the American South soon introduced oppressive Jim Crow laws that constituted an updated version of slavery. And right now, one could argue that we're living in the "dip" following the election of America's first Black president, Barack

Obama. But none of history's worst dips – war, genocide, or fascism – have happened out of the blue. Even the election of a right-wing demagogue like Donald Trump had a decade-long buildup. Trump's presidency was enabled by economic, social, and political structures set up long ago and allowed to thrive by people who chose not to see their systemic flaws. And while it's easy to slide into a dip, it's a lot harder to come out of one. Doing so requires many people working together to build a better future – people like you.

Your story determines the causes you care about.

Police reform, better health care, climate justice – there's a thousand good causes to start fighting for right now. And if we want to create a better world, we'll need to advance each of them. As a compassionate individual, you probably care about many issues. But those closest to your heart are determined by your own personal backstory. For Shaun, it was a brutal incident in high school that set him on the path of fighting racial injustice. The key message here is: Your story determines the causes you care about. Shaun was born in 1978 to a Black dad and a white mom. Growing up with his mom in Versailles, Kentucky, being mixed-race didn't seem like a big deal throughout elementary and middle school. But when he entered high school, Shaun had to reckon with the fact that many people in his small town cared much more about his skin color than he did. At Woodford County High School, racial tensions had always run high, regularly erupting into fights between Black and white students. As a mixed-race kid straddling this divide, Shaun was singled out and harassed by his white classmates from day one. In defiance, he embraced his Black identity all the more fervently, dedicating himself to learning about the culture he'd missed out on growing up. His white bullies weren't amused that he chose the side of his Black friends. Their attacks became more frequent, and more than once Shaun ended up at the center of a racially motivated brawl. One day, as he was making his way to band class, a crowd of 15 white teenagers cornered him in the hallway. By the time Shaun realized what was happening, it was already too late. The white mob started hitting and kicking him until he was barely conscious. They left him bleeding on the floor. Shaun was hospitalized with multiple fractures, a concussion, and severe injuries that would stay with him for life. This awful experience made Shaun uniquely aware of the mental and physical pain racial injustice causes its victims. So when he finally got out of high school and left for Morehouse College in Atlanta, he promised his mom that he would dedicate his life to fighting racial injustice. Your own story might not be as harrowing as Shaun's, but there are probably some issues that you care about deeply because of how they've personally affected you.

Decide on a cause, forget your excuses, and start making a change.

There's likely more than one cause that you connect with personally and feel passionate about. That's OK! But if you want to become an effective agent of change, you'll have to ask yourself a tough question: What do I care about the most? As individuals, we have limited time and resources. And while you may care about, discuss, and amplify many different causes, you can only effectively fight for one. In order to help narrow your focus to one cause, consider this: Which issue makes you cry, rage, and despair more

than any other? That's the cause you should be fighting for. The key message here is: Decide on a cause, forget your excuses, and start making a change. Once you've determined your cause, you need to consciously decide to fight for it. That means committing your time, skills, and resources to advance it. It's easy to start believing that your tiny contribution won't ever matter. But think of it this way: if you stay silent in the face of injustice, you're complicit in upholding that injustice. Still, you might find yourself making up excuses for not getting involved. You might tell yourself that you're too old, too young, too white, or not smart enough to be an agent for change. But that's all nonsense! Successful social movements depend on people from all walks of life. Just remember that Greta Thunberg was only 16 when she started orchestrating the biggest climate strike in human history! And Black entertainer Harry Belafonte is over 90 years old and still a vocal activist for racial justice. "Alright," you might say, "but I'm just too busy." Well, guess what - we're all busy. Take progressive politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who waited tables and bartended while running for Congress. If you want to make a change, you'll have to schedule time for your activist work as you would for any other important task. Even a few hours of volunteer work each week can make a huge difference. Life will keep providing you with excuses, but it's important to stay focused on the cause you believe in. After getting involved in campus politics at Morehouse College, Shaun almost buried his activist career. He accepted a teaching job and worked as a motivational speaker to provide for his young family. However, in 2014, the video of a police officer choking Eric Garner set Shaun back on track. This video was his wake-up call.

Get to work, find your gift, and learn the rest along the way.

Now that you're ready to start effecting change, you might come up against another hurdle: you don't know where to begin! But don't worry - your next concrete steps are actually pretty easy. Go online and research leading organizations dedicated to your cause. Find one that has a local chapter near you, and email them to ask how you can get started as a volunteer. You can also show up to one of their public events. Becoming an activist is as simple as that! Here's the key message: Get to work, find your gift, and learn the rest along the way. Now that you've found an organization you'd like to support, here are a few more tips to follow when getting started. First, make sure you read as much information as you can about the organization, their cause, and their volunteering process. Second, give them a bit of time to respond. A lot of organizations are understaffed and overworked, and training new volunteers can be time-consuming. Lastly, don't ask if they're hiring - at least not right away. We all need money, but money shouldn't be the primary goal of your activism. Once you've gotten your foot in the door, prepare yourself for a lot of listening and learning. Your organization will likely have an onboarding process for new volunteers, and it's important that you follow it thoroughly to get the most out of your work. Also, be sure to keep reading and researching your cause on your own. At one point though, you'll have to put down the books and get to work. In the beginning, that work might not be very glamorous. As a new volunteer, your organization may ask you to do small tasks such as data entry, taking meeting notes, printing stuff, passing out flyers, or having people sign petitions. Do these small jobs with pride; they are just as vital to the cause as anything else and will help you get familiar with the organization. Later on, you'll have opportunities to bring in your own unique skills and talents. Because no matter what you're good at - whether it's writing, accounting, or filmmaking - your movement will benefit from your contribution. Shaun,

for example, used the public speaking skills he'd picked up working as a pastor to speak out on issues of racial injustice. So ask yourself: What is your gift, and how can you put it to use for your cause?

Every movement needs three things - energized people, good organization, and a solid plan.

You're invested in your cause because you believe it to be good, right, and true. Surely, it can't be all that hard to get other people on the side of something that embodies these characteristics - right? The truth is, even though most people mean no harm, many of them are complacent, misinformed, or easily manipulated. This means it often takes just a few people with money and power to thwart a progressive social movement. It also means that good intentions alone are not enough to create significant, systemic change. Here's the key message: Every movement needs three things - energized people, good organization, and a solid plan. To reiterate, the odds are stacked against us. But social movements have one advantage over politicians and billionaires: numbers. When thousands of motivated people come together to fight for a cause, they can shift the needle of the media narrative and put pressure on politicians to make real change. It wasn't until the Black Lives Matter hashtag united millions of people that journalists and politicians started treating police violence as a national emergency. Despite this, however, not a single family of the victims - whether Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, or Eric Garner - got justice. Even though the initial movement succeeded in energizing people and raising awareness, it failed to funnel all that momentum into a single stream. In order to achieve concrete goals, the people participating in a social movement need to coordinate. For your organization, this means getting to know your volunteers and supporters, harnessing their skills and stories, and setting up an efficient structure of communication and supervision. It also means connecting and collaborating with other organizations dedicated to your cause. The American civil rights movement only succeeded because of a rich behind-the-scenes network of activists, religious leaders, and academics from different groups and organizations. The last element a successful social movement needs is a plan - a plan as good and sophisticated as the problem is bad and complex. With his organization Raise the Age, Shaun successfully raised the minimum age for incarceration in New York to 18 years old. His team managed to do this by creating a detailed plan with concrete steps that involved everything from professional social media campaigns to recruiting volunteers to coordinating mass phone calls and emails to government officials. In 2017, they even got New York governor Andrew Cuomo to support their legislation - and a few weeks later, the bill was passed.

Activism is not about winning every fight; it's about learning from failures and bouncing back.

All of us are afraid of failure. And in activism, failures can hurt particularly bad. Imagine putting in hours and hours of work for a good cause - just to see it falter. But here's the

thing: you will fail. When you're up against big, evil, and corrupt systems of injustice, you will fail much more often than you will win. Take Bernie Sanders, who lost five times in a row when he first started running for the US Senate in the 1970s. Failure is common, but when you eventually win, it will matter all the more. Bernie won his first Senate race in 1981, and his presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 inspired a whole new movement for change. The key message here is: Activism is not about winning every fight; it's about learning from failures and bouncing back. In 2016, Shaun cofounded Real Justice, an organization dedicated to electing progressive district attorneys all across the country. Even though most Americans can't even name their DA, these state prosecutors play a crucial role in determining criminal charges and administering justice. Right out of the gate, Real Justice celebrated a huge success. In Philadelphia, they helped progressive civil rights attorney Larry Krasner win his DA election. But when they tried to apply their strategy to the counties of San Diego and Sacramento soon after, they suffered some devastating blows. Their candidates lost out to conservative, right-wing challengers by huge percentages. But the Real Justice team transformed these failures into lessons. They learned that they had to locally adjust their messaging strategy and highlight issues of public safety alongside issues of mass incarceration and criminal injustice. This knowledge helped them win a crucial election in San Antonio, where progressive candidate Wesley Bell became the first Black DA ever. Even though failures hurt, they can inform our strategies for the better - as long as we manage to bounce back. And the best way to foster such resilience and stamina is to take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself starts with learning to say "No." Many activists are prone to giving everything, helping everyone, and being available all the time. They may also face vicious personal attacks online. Naturally, such overinvolvement eventually results in complete exhaustion. That's why it's so important to set boundaries with your work and schedule media-free downtime to relax by yourself, or connect with family and friends. And whenever you feel like you don't deserve to rest, remember what Audre Lorde once said: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Change won't happen until you make it happen.

History is often presented to us as a highlight reel of triumphs and catastrophes. It makes sense - if you want to tell a good story, you only focus on the interesting parts. But what you can't see from this narrativized perspective is that big historical events never just happen. From the abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights Act, historical moments of change didn't come about because of a few protests or speeches. They were the result of thousands of small things done by thousands of real humans living real lives and dealing with real problems. As Shaun's friend and work partner Lee Merritt likes to put it, "It's on us." The key message here is: Change won't happen until you make it happen. When people talk about social, economic, or climate injustice in America, they sometimes claim that our systems are broken. But most of the time, that's simply not true. Take, for example, the systems of American government and global capitalism - they weren't invented to ensure fairness and equality for all. They were created to benefit a few privileged white men. These fortunate few have no incentive to change the systems that have worked so well for them, and they have a lot of money and power to prevent change from ever happening. But this shouldn't be a reason for those who care about justice to resign - it should be a reason for us to fight harder. Because even though the risk of failure is high, the rewards are enormous. In 2019,

Shaun's activist efforts literally saved a man's life. At the time, Rodney Reed, a Black man from Texas, was on death row for allegedly killing a white woman. After an episode of Dr. Phil revealed the shaky foundations of Reed's conviction, Shaun started a massive social media campaign to prevent the execution. Through tireless efforts, he got three million people to sign a petition against the execution and coordinated volunteers to make thousands of phone calls to politicians. Even though the fight seemed hopeless in the beginning, the conservative Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles halted the process just a few days before the execution. Rodney Reed is still alive today because Shaun believed in his cause. These blinks have shown you how to determine your cause – and how to start fighting for it effectively right now in order to create meaningful change. In the end, change starts with you.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: History is an interplay of progressive advances and conservative backlashes – but movements of determined people with good organization and solid plans can move the needle for the better. Positive change begins with you making a conscious decision to dedicate your time, skills, and resources to the cause you care about the most. In order to be a successful change-maker, it's vital to learn from your failures, take care of yourself, and keep doing the work. Actionable advice: Create your own phone-free zones. As an activist, it's important to take time off from social media – a particularly toxic place if you're invested in social justice. That's why it's important to spend time away from your phone. "Phone-free" places like spas, movie theaters, or nature retreats can help you wind down. You can also establish your own phone-free times and zones – during family dinner, for example. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Make Change as the subject line and share your thoughts! What to read next: From [#BlackLivesMatter](#) to [Black Liberation](#), by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor In [Make Change](#), you learned how to join and advance the fight for justice. Author Shaun King often uses social media to promote his causes. It was his online activism that made him into one of the leading figures of the Black Lives Matter movement. From [#BlackLivesMatter](#) to [Black Liberation](#) explains how BLM went from an online campaign to the biggest social justice movement of our time – and how it could change America forever. If you're interested in this modern civil rights movement, check out our blinks to [From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation](#).