

Four Roles of Social Activism

By Bill Moyer

Glen's note: I copied this information from www.commonslibrary.org and edited it somewhat.

The following excerpt from *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* introduces the crucial four roles required for social movement success.

Activists need to become aware of the roles they and their organizations are playing in the larger social movement. There are four different roles activists and social movements need to play in order to successfully create social change: the citizen, rebel, change agent, and reformer. Each role has different purposes, styles, skills, and needs and can be played effectively or ineffectively.

Social movement activists need first to be seen by the public as responsible citizens. They must win the respect and, ultimately, the acceptance of the majority of ordinary citizens in order for their movements to succeed. Consequently effective citizen activists need to say "Yes!" to those fundamental principles, values, and symbols of a good society that are also accepted by the general public. At the same time, activists must be rebels who say a loud "No!" and protest social conditions and institutional policies and practices that violate core societal values and principles. Activists need to be change agents who work to educate, organize, and involve the general public to actively oppose

present policies and seek positive, constructive solutions. Finally, activists must also be reformers who work with the official political and judicial structures to incorporate solutions into new laws and the policies and practices of society's public and private institutions. Then they must work to get them accepted as the conventional wisdom of mainstream society.

Both individual activists and movement organizations need to understand that social movements require all four roles and that participants and their organizations can choose which ones to play depending on their own make-up and the needs of the movement. Moreover they need to distinguish between effective and ineffective ways of playing these roles. Understanding a social movement's need to have all four roles played effectively can help reduce antagonism and promote cooperation among different groups of activists and organizations.

The following descriptions of the four roles include effective and ineffective ways to play them. Fuller examination of the four roles can be found in the full chapter "The Four Roles of Social Activism" in *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*.

The author explains that:

- Four roles are necessary: Citizen; Reformer; Rebel; Change Agent.
- Some people tend to focus on some roles more than others.
- Each role can be performed effectively or ineffectively.

CITIZEN:

Effective:

- Promotes positive national values, principles, symbols (*e.g.*, democracy, freedom, justice, nonviolence)
- Normal citizen
- Grounded in center of society
- Promotes active citizen-based society where citizens act with disinterest to assure the common good
- The active citizen is the source of legitimate political power
- Acts on "confirmatory basis" concept
- Examples: King and Mandela

Ineffective:

- Naïve citizen: Believes the 'official policies' and does not realize that the powerholders and institutions serve special elite interests at the expense of the majority and the common good
- Super-patriot: Gives automatic obedience to powerholders and the country

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REFORMER:

Effective:

- Parliamentary: Uses official mainstream system and institutions (*e.g.*, courts, legislature, city hall, corporations) to get the movement's goals, values, alternatives adopted into official laws, policies and conventional wisdom
- Uses a variety of means: lobbying, lawsuits, referenda, rallies, candidates, etc.
- Professional Opposition Organizations (POOs) are the key movement agencies
- Watchdogs successes to assure enforcement, expand success, and protect against backlash.
- POOs nurture and support grassroots

Ineffective:

- Dominator/patriarchal model of organizational structure and leadership
- Organizational maintenance over movement needs
- Dominator style undermines movement democracy and disempowers grassroots
- "Realistic Politics": Promotes minor reforms rather than social changes
- Co-optation: POO staff identify more with official powerholders than with movement's grassroots

REBEL:

Effective:

- Protest: Says NO! to violations of positive, widely held values
- Nonviolent direct action and attitude; demonstrations, rallies, and marches including civil disobedience
- Target: Powerholders and their institutions (*e.g.*, government, corporations)
- Puts issue and policies in public spotlight and on society's agenda
- Actions have strategy and tactics
- Empowered, exciting, courageous, risky, center of public attention
- Holds relative, not absolute, truth

Ineffective:

- Authoritarian anti-authoritarian
- Anti-American, anti-authority, anti-organization structures and rules
- Self-identifies as militant radical, a lonely voice on society's fringe
- Any means necessary: disruptive tactics and violence to property and people
- Tactics without realistic strategy
- Isolated from grassroots mass-base
- Victim behavior: Angry, dogmatic, aggressive, powerless
- Ideological totalism: Holds absolute truth and moral, political superiority
- Strident, arrogant, egocentric; self needs before movement needs
- Irony of negative rebel: Negative rebel similar to agent provocateur

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CHANGE AGENT:

Effective:

- Organizes People Power and the Engaged Citizenry, creating participatory democracy for the common good
- Educates and involves majority of citizens and whole society on the issue
- Involves pre-existing mass-based grassroots organizations, networks, coalitions, and activists on the issue
- Promote strategies and tactics for waging long-term social movement.
- Creates and supports grassroots activism and organizations for the long term
- Puts issue on society's political agenda
- Counters new powerholder strategies
- Promote alternatives
- Promotes paradigm shift

Ineffective:

- Too utopian: Promote visions of perfectionistic alternatives in isolation from practical political and social action
- Promote only minor reform
- Movement leadership and organizations based on patriarchy and control rather than participatory democracy
- Tunnel vision: advocates single issue
- Ignores personal issues and needs of activists
- Unconnected to social and political social change and paradigm shift

The information above came from Bill Moyer's excellent 2001 book,

Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements, 2001, pp 21-22 & pp 28-29