

# Social Power

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The Twelve Habits of  
Successful Change-Makers

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# The Social Change Project sought to answer one critical question: what can we learn about how social change is happening today that can strengthen civil society's future efforts?

Over 18 months, around 400 change-makers took part in a conversation that identified the ways of thinking and behaving that characterise successful examples of change. These behaviours or 'habits' were exhibited by charity campaigners, local activists, service providers, and parents fighting for their children's rights. We found them in organisations of all sizes and types. People from all walks of life, with all kinds of goals, who are all working to make something better.

We shared what we learned in the Social Power report, which urges civil society to unleash its 'social power' by being bolder and braver.



## The Social Change

Use this summary of *The 12 Habits of Successful Change-Makers* to stimulate a discussion with colleagues:

- How well do you perform against each of *The 12 Habits*: individually, as a team, and as an organisation?
- How might you develop your personal qualities, skills or knowledge?
- How could your organisational culture, processes or structures better support successful change-making?
- How will you act on your conclusions?
- Who else needs to know about *The 12 Habits* and how will you spread the word?

You can read the *Social Power* report, including full versions of new tools '*The 12 Habits of Successful Change-Makers*' and '*The Social Power Grid*', at [www.smk.org.uk/social-power-report](http://www.smk.org.uk/social-power-report)

## 1. Mission first, not model or money

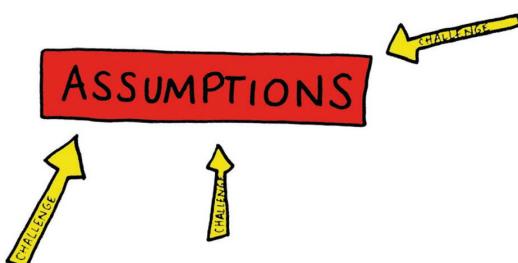
All the examples of successful change we looked at – whether led by organisations or individuals – were relentlessly mission-led. Nothing diverts them.

Whether the parent trying to secure the support their child needs, or Nigel Farage trying to persuade the UK to leave Europe, both are characterised by an absolute focus on their end goal. The best campaigners are those who are literally ‘on a mission’. In bigger organisations, the mission allows many people to come together around a common cause.

While it may seem obvious to be mission-led, it is easy to get blown off course. There is pressure to secure income, to grow, or even just to survive. Organisations can become more focused on securing money, or maintaining the model, than pursuing their mission. It takes brave leadership to completely change organisational strategy in order to pursue mission in a different way. Yet, the risk of not acting could be becoming less effective and, eventually, obsolete.

Mission also matters to public perception. If the first and most frequent experience people have of a charity is a request for money, then this will come to be seen as their primary concern. The public needs to experience charities for what they truly exist to do – not just the fundraising appeals.

## 2. Looking at the bigger picture (whole-systems approach)



Successful change-makers recognise that change is complex. They constantly review their strategy to ensure they are pursuing change in the best way. They ask, where does power lie now? Who or what can I influence? What can others do better than me? Who can I get to help? They are open to working with new partners and in new places. They will constantly think about how they can move their goal forward. Duncan Green calls this ‘dancing with the system’<sup>1</sup>.

The practice of ‘systems thinking’ is gaining ground, and there are many guides to help you work with it<sup>2</sup>. And yet, the ‘dancing feet’ of change-makers are often tied down by organisational structures and cultures that do not allow for a nimble, iterative approach.

Organisations and funders often want to know exactly how a project will be delivered, and what outcomes secured. The requirements of budgeting, performance management and reporting are all built around predictable linear planning processes. Even Theories of Change, introduced to allow for flexible planning, can have the opposite effect by committing organisations to fixed ways of working.

From many campaigners we heard a clear plea for better monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) that measures meaningful actions in a complex system. Good campaigners are natural systems thinkers. Bigger, more traditional organisations should see how they work and consider what kind of environment would support them.

## 3. Being adaptive and responsive

‘Events, dear boy, events’, as Harold MacMillan famously said. Social change is often driven by events.

The Kings Cross fire is thought to have played a key role in building public support for the smoking ban. The image of Alan Kurdi, the young

<sup>1</sup> Green, D. (2016). *How change happens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Abercrombie, R., Harries, E. & Wharton, R., (2015). *Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thinknpsc.org/publications/systems-change/>

boy on the beach in Greece, mobilised a whole new level of response to the refugee crisis.

Effective change-makers understand this and are able to adapt and respond quickly. Social change is not a linear process – it takes unexpected turns and rarely follows a plan. Navigating this complexity requires flexible, agile thinking and action. But many people talked about the difficulty of working within restrictive organisational processes that presume a linear progression of change.

How can we better equip our organisations with the flexibility and the openness to experiment and take risks to thrive? Are we reading the world accurately and taking sufficient account of new trends, horizon-scanning for future possibilities?

The speed with which smaller and grassroots activists can organise can also leave bigger players behind. We are already seeing powerful social movements, like #metoo, grow very rapidly and generate sometimes indiscriminate change. Should they co-opt more experienced change-makers to help focus their supporters' energy?

#### 4. Persistence, perseverance

#### and resilience



Social change rarely happens overnight. Truly transformational and sustainable change can be a long, difficult road. Successful change-makers are in it for the long-term. They use setbacks as opportunities to learn. Even when things get really tough, they just keep going.

Breakthroughs often only occur after years of hard work. The Networked Change report notes, 'unseen by most observers, many of the most successful major advocacy campaigns we studied spent years building up power, scaling their networks and honing their story away from the limelight, before they broke into national consciousness and scored dramatic victories'.<sup>3</sup>

Remember that persistence today is laying the foundation for future success. This can help you to persevere when things get difficult. Keep your mission and the bigger picture in mind.

Emily May, Executive Director at Hollaback! says: "There is a myth that creating deep seated social change is somehow all about winning ... organising is all about resilience. You'll get hit in every direction you can imagine – but if you keep getting up, and trying again, eventually you'll win."

How to build in resilience was a question that came up repeatedly in our discussions – burnout was a big concern. Working for change can be tiring, under-resourced and feel unrelenting. Networks that allow mutual support can help, and people increasingly understand the importance of self-care.

#### 5. In whose name?



Successful change-makers placed people firmly at the centre, as captured in the familiar phrase 'nothing about us, without us'.

This is not just about co-production, consultation, or being 'empowered'. It's about giving people the tools of change, including the power to

decide. This is challenging for larger organisations that want to encourage more 'user involvement' but struggle to genuinely devolve decisions and resources.

To bring about effective change, we must understand the issue and what needs to change. We need, therefore, to work with the people who it will affect, as their insight will generally define what success looks like. Where possible, be led by them and their experiences.

Is it acceptable for one group to drive change for another? One person quoted the West Wing - 'the decisions are made by those who show up' - but challenged us to question why others aren't there. How can we better include those who aren't in the room? According to Baljeet Sandhu, there is widespread appreciation of these ideas but progress has been slow. She says, 'sharing power with experts by experience is rare, whilst excluding them from decision-making processes is common'.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Primacy of relationships

The importance of relationship in social change was a powerful theme in all our conversations. Change depends hugely on the quality of the relationship, whether between an advocate and a minister, or a service-provider and the person they are supporting.

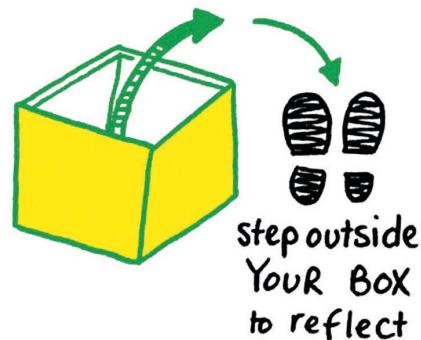
Relationships of trust hold huge transformative power. For those in need, who may have many good reasons to be distrustful and even resistant, a relationship built on trust offers an opportunity to be open to change. Only when vulnerable people really feel a provider is on their side, respects them, is committed to them, will they take the risk of personal change. Many small and local charities have built up these relationships over many years. It is what allows them to do the work they do.

Relationship and persuasion are two of the most powerful ways to influence politicians. No matter how much formal power they hold,

all people respond to human connection. To feel listened to, to feel heard, to feel respected, to feel supported is a powerful motivator. To be shouted at, to be accused, to be challenged, can have the opposite effect.

This is not to say there aren't times when it is right to do this - to express anger, to criticise, to confront - but successful change-makers do this consciously, knowing what it can and can't achieve.

## 7. Understanding other people's interests and motivations – even when it makes us uncomfortable



'I don't like that man, I must get to know him better.' This quote from Abraham Lincoln struck a chord during discussions about what a more effective civil society would look like.

Frequently, effective campaigners talk about trying to put themselves 'in other people's shoes'. Whether planning an appeal to the public or a particular decision-maker, successful change-makers start by understanding who they are, how they think and why they might change their minds.

This is a powerful tool when turned on those we don't agree with. Change-makers we spoke to were keen to learn from people working on different issues or in different sectors. There was particular awareness of the risk of being stuck in an echo chamber while social divides are growing wider or opening along new dimensions.

<sup>5</sup> Sandhu, B. (2017). The value of lived experience in social change: the need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector. Retrieved from <http://thelivedexperience.org/report/>

## 8. Radical listening and an asset-based approach

Many instances of successful social change were built around what we have termed 'radical listening', often accompanied by an 'asset-based' approach. Both proceed from a belief that people and communities have value and potential, and with the right support can be agents of their own change. They are best placed to define the change they need and the role they want to play.

Service-providers and initiatives that transform listen to people in a wholly open way. They don't impose their own agenda or preconceptions. They see their role as enabling.

'Asset-based' approaches are also at the centre of some of the most interesting community initiatives. Taking the view that local people are best-placed to manage a local resource, forward thinking local authorities and funders are handing over local facilities to community control.

## 9. Collaborating rather than competing



Most instances of social change are a collaborative effort. For ambitious change, this is absolutely essential. We can't do everything by ourselves but, by working with others who have compatible goals, we can aspire to more systemic change.

These might be public and formal, such as End Violence Against Women. Or less public but still formal, such as 'white-label' collaborations like Time to Change.

We also heard about behind-the-scenes collaboration to mutual benefit. Often, large 'insider' organisations welcome smaller, less constrained 'outsider' organisations being outspoken and challenging. This motivates policymakers to have the 'insider' conversations needed.

There was a strong appetite amongst change-makers for more collaboration, but also frustration with the barriers that prevent it – organisational ego, competition for funding, and the time and resources required to set up and maintain networks or coalitions.

'White-label' campaigns may be successful but they can also cause conflict with fundraising and brand objectives, as profile must be set aside in the interest of mission. How far do collaborators need to share all of our values? Are we willing to share resources and decision-making? Should funders encourage greater collaboration?

## 10. Knowing our tools

Making change happen is complex, and there are many tools and tactics we can draw on. Effective change-makers keep a variety of tools sharp. Change-making is a living, breathing discipline. There is rarely just one 'right' approach, and what might have worked last year may not next.

Campaigners told us how valuable it is to come together to share ideas and experiences. Many expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities to connect with others working on different issues or within different sectors. A problem one person is struggling with might be easily answered by those working elsewhere. Involving service-users, for example, can pose a challenge to a large long-established charity. But a smaller, more local entity may excel at this and offer sound advice.

## 11. Evaluating what matters and learning from it

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) can feel like a distraction, if not an impediment to change. The requirement for predictable outcomes, easily measured in financial terms, can prevent effective, adaptive working.

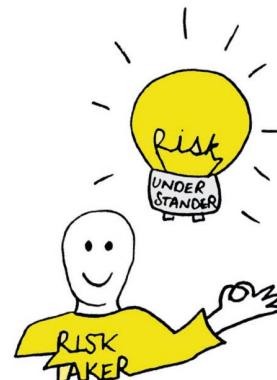
For service providers, the key to successful MEL is to first know where the value lies – what are we really trying to do? Leading edge approaches acknowledge that it may not be possible to know in advance where the real value will be created, and that service-users may be best placed to define it.

Campaigners and organisers know that social change is complex, messy and can take a long time. But they often feel under pressure to demonstrate their impact using linear evaluation models that push them into shorter-term thinking and planning.

Our response to complexity should not be to focus on the 'easier' activities, but rather to develop better models of evaluation. New Philanthropy Capital highlights the pitfalls of applying a linear version of Theory of Change<sup>6</sup>. Conceptual models are useful only if you recognise that they are just that – an approximation of reality, not reality itself.

Evaluation should not be a tick-box exercise to please funders or management, it should be a chance for meaningful reflection. We heard about organisational cultures that do not countenance failure, despite it often being the most valuable learning opportunity. How can we encourage a culture of learning from failure, despite pressures? Perhaps we should take some inspiration from Engineers Without Borders Canada, who publish an annual 'failure report'.<sup>7</sup>

## 12. Taking responsible risks



Risk aversion in leadership, governance and culture was one of the barriers to effective change we identified. It's important to consider the consequences of our actions, of course, but there is also risk in **not** acting.

Taking responsible risks is part of being true to our mission. With the right contingency planning and monitoring, sometimes taking risks can be the right thing to do.

Economist Tim Harford highlights three steps to adapting effectively: 'First, try new things, expecting some will fail. Second, make failure survivable: create safe spaces for failure and move forward in small steps ... And third, make sure you know when you've failed, or you will never learn.'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Abercrombie, R., Boswell, K. and Thomasoo, R. (2018). Thinking Big: How to use Theory of Change for systems change, New Philanthropy Capital.

<sup>7</sup> Failure Report (2016), Engineers Without Borders.

<sup>8</sup> Harford, T. (2012). Adapt – why success always starts with failure. Abacus.

Read the full Social Power report at  
**[smk.org.uk/social-power-report](http://smk.org.uk/social-power-report)**

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