



## Five Good Ideas about Building a Movement

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**Wednesday, November 28, 2007 - 12:00 to 2:00 PM**

### **1. You can't build a movement**

Movements cannot be artificially constructed - just like a river cannot be. Instead, they 'form up' or 'emerge' when lots of things come together and generate enough coordinated motion that people notice. A movement that has been 'built' is likely to be unsustainable. I prefer terms like 'uncover', or 'enable', because they better reflect the organic elements of social movements. And our challenge is not to make something, but rather *gather* it. So instead of thinking this is something external that we manufacture, or pound, or smith, or refine – we should think about it as something organic and innate. It becomes a movement because of the resonance it creates with the receiver (either an individual or a group). I prefer we call it *cultivating a constituency*.

### **2. Aggregate shared interests**

This is more about pattern-recognition - seeing the connections between agents - than it is about getting whole groups of people to color between proscribed lines (this is better referred to as ideology or dogma). The problem is that we can be a bit slavish about the 'fidelity' of our cause or focus. Think of all the collaborations you have tried to initiate and sustain. Do you remember all the time spent defining a mission? Or even deciding on where the logos go on the stationery? The temptation is often to define what we're concerned about in overly narrow terms.

Beware every time someone announces it's time to be *strategic*. What does that actually *mean*? It probably means the agenda you're trying to get included is seen by others as watering theirs down. This isn't necessarily so. Framing your agenda in overly narrow terms risks alienating people or groups who feel their interests are excluded. It's much more powerful to pitch a really large tent that allows all sorts of people to find their interest or cause or values within. See if you can cobble together related affinities - and remember they do not have to agree with each other, they just have to see the relationships that are already there between and among them. What are probably lacking are the vehicles that highlight those connections and make them reciprocally beneficial. 'Connect the dots'; 'joined-up thinking'; 'silo-busting'; 'place-based': these are all terms for finding ways of working that recognize that *everything is connected*.

### **3. Highlight connections**

Connections are vehicles for transactions. The transaction needs to be tangible and reciprocal. If it is too passive (think of task forces without any actual tasks), or the benefit of the transaction only goes one way (I'm in, you're not) then obviously it will not be sustainable. In great cities and neighborhoods we see varieties of connections that enable transactions: streets and sidewalks, sporting leagues, markets and commercial corridors, transit, the bourse- they are part of how the city integrates its various uses and activities. But what about where those connections have been disrupted or blocked or lost: landfills 'bury' our garbage, job requirements are antiquated and prevent access, indigenous language use or craft subsidies; are there ways to *restore connections* to make things work better, more adaptively, more resourcefully?

### **4. Let differentiation happen**

Variation is a natural and very positive force in ecological and social life: look at the diversity of Canadian society, for example. It is about how differentiation happens naturally and strengthens the capacity of the whole. Some of us may have a draconian controlling tendency – to stay rigidly 'on message' or 'on topic'. Fostering a constituency is not about being bossy or controlling or limiting. In fact it is the opposite of those things: it is about passion and unpredictability because you are making a commitment to *let it happen*. Stridency crowds out dissent and particularity, and prevents you from

finding out all the various ways in which whatever you are advocating for is in synchronization with what others are seeking. So it includes lots of dissent and lots of engagement and 'differentiated participation'. Not everyone wants to picket, or stuff envelopes, or read policy briefs. We can differentiate not only in terms of how we engage, but also around what issue.

### **5. Feed the particular**

De-centralizing resources is a good way to feed the particular. Once you've identified the interests and shared affinities, and the potential connections that can link you, then resist the temptation to focus on the centre, and instead do the counter-intuitive thing and start finding ways to support the peripheries (or 'the edge' if that appeals to you), by creating vehicles for actors to communicate across their constituencies. Start a wiki; create shared spaces. Knock down some outdated local ordinances and develop some new rules. After all, there are lots and lots of ways to feed the particular.