Civic Engagement

Should You Agitate, Innovate, or Orchestrate?

A framework for understanding the roles you can play in a movement for social change.

By Julie Battilana & Marissa Kimsey | Sep. 18, 2017

When Marie Trellu-Kane observed increased fragmentation across social and economic lines in France, and increasing youth unemployment, she could not help but respond. In 1994, along with Lisbeth Shepherd and Anne-Claire Pache, she cofounded Unis-Cité, a nonprofit that launched France’s first youth service program, modeled after City Year in the United States. Still the president of Unis-Cité in 2017, Trellu-Kane recalled, “We were 23 [years old] at the time, so we created the organization that we wished would have existed to satisfy our own desires to act on the problems of exclusion and inequality.”

Unis-Cité recruits volunteers between the ages of 18 and 25 from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They work together in small groups to serve their communities during their nine months as full-time Unis-Cité corps members, helping nonprofit and public organizations such as homeless shelters and community centers. Trellu-Kane and her cofounders set out not only to offer the first youth civilian service program in France, but also, as Unis-Cité’s charter states, to “create the conditions such that a period of time devoted to civic engagement becomes a natural part of every young person’s life in France.” Their vision of bringing together youth from different backgrounds to serve communities required a major social change in a country where no
such program existed before. Over the following two decades, they worked tirelessly to make this change happen. In doing so, they found themselves playing different roles at different times.

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In this article, we build on research on social change,\(^1\) including our own research,\(^2\) for which we studied hundreds of social change initiatives over multiple years and interviewed social entrepreneurs, civil society leaders, and public officials around the world. We identify three distinct roles played by those who participate in movements for social change: agitator, innovator, and orchestrator. An **agitator** brings the grievances of specific individuals or groups to the forefront of public awareness. An **innovator** creates an actionable solution\(^3\) to address these grievances. And an **orchestrator** coordinates action across groups, organizations, and sectors to scale the proposed solution. Any pathway to social change requires all three. Agitation without innovation means complaints without ways forward, and innovation without orchestration means ideas without impact.

In reality, the boundaries between these roles may blur, with some individuals and organizations playing multiple roles either at once or sequentially. Far from being linear, the social change process may require that change makers switch back and forth among the three roles. Over a period of more than 20 years, Trellu-Kane and her cofounders not only innovated to develop a seed program of youth service, but also built on the work of agitators who brought social and economic divisions to the fore of public awareness. They themselves agitated at times, and also orchestrated to secure political commitment for their goals. However, it is important to separate the roles of agitator, innovator, and orchestrator conceptually, because the challenges that they raise for leaders of change differ, and each requires different kinds of resources and actions. Not all participants in a movement for change can or should undertake all three roles at all times.

While a single individual or organization’s level of control and impact is limited, movements succeed thanks to the involvement and commitment of many who contribute in their own ways. We hope that distinguishing between these potential roles will enable those who aspire to take action and participate in a movement for social change to think deeply about the different options
available to them, and about how they could be more effective in playing each of the different roles.

**Leaders’ Sources of Power and Primary Tasks**

Like all leaders of social change, Trellu-Kane and her cofounders faced daunting challenges. One was coordinating an approach to change between individuals and organizations with different interests, and across different sectors in France (including young people, nonprofits involved in social services delivery, corporate donors, and the state). A second was establishing credibility in a way that compensated for the cofounders’ lack of formal authority. And a third was convincing others to adopt new habits associated with a youth civilian service program (such as dedicating nine months to serve one’s community) that diverged from deep-seated norms.

Existing power dynamics made leading social change even more challenging. People from all walks of life come not only to accept existing power differences, but also to take them for granted and even deepen them. Existing norms are reinforced not just by powerful individuals and organizations that gain from maintaining the status quo, but also by those with limited power, who end up accepting their lower status positions. Leaders of change get stuck both when their underestimation of power hierarchies befuddles their intentions, and when their overestimation of power hierarchies paralyzes their actions.

To overcome these challenges, individuals and organizations must inspire and guide collective action toward change using the sources of power at their disposal. These sources may come in several flavors: personal sources of power, which come from attributes like charisma, effort, experiences, passion, and expertise; positional sources of power, from elected and appointed roles in organizations and society; and relational sources of power, from connections with other people, such as family, friends, and colleagues.

Our research indicates that to promote social change effectively, movement leaders must focus especially on three tasks: communicating, organizing, and evaluating.
By communicating, leaders can establish a shared sense of the tension between the current reality and the desired goal, and a shared vision of how to implement a solution. They can encourage collective action not only by sharing facts and numbers, but also by telling stories.\(^7\) Stories evoke emotions that elicit action and enable stakeholders to understand the movement’s leaders, each other, and the urgency of the collective work.\(^8\) To spark action, leaders may frame problems as unjust and time-sensitive, fostering urgency. To sustain action, they may draw on small wins, shared language, and accountability, fostering hope, solidarity, and self-efficacy.\(^9\)

**Organizing** requires coordinating collective action toward change by developing processes, systems, and sometimes structures such as formal organizational bodies.\(^10\) To meet their missions, movements for change have to adapt to changing conditions\(^11\) and often benefit from participatory governance structures, like those of advocacy groups that promote public voice and collective identity.\(^12\) Effective change makers harness the power of others by finding and cultivating leadership among them—strengthening their skills, values, and sense of responsibility to act and coordinate with each other in the pursuit of social change.\(^13\)

Finally, leading social change means continuously **evaluating** the movement’s progress. Doing so is challenging because there is no easy way to track change adoption on a large scale, especially when dealing with qualitative changes in people’s behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. However, evaluation is critical if the movement is to keep sight of its purpose as it grows, and to continue to motivate participants in the face of obstacles. In early stages, evaluation may involve only a checklist of inputs and activities; later, it may become more sophisticated, with the objective of longitudinally accounting for outputs—and, possibly, impact—in a more systematic way.\(^14\)

The tasks of communicating, organizing, and evaluating differ depending on the role that an individual or organization is playing at a given time—agitator, innovator, and/or orchestrator. They also sometimes require the use of different sources of power. Below, we illustrate how these tasks differ, and the main traps that those in each role may fall into as they pursue social change.

**Agitator**
Agitation may take many forms. Agitators may stand in picket lines and shout slogans, or they may come from the halls of science. For example, American marine biologist Rachel Carson was an agitator who alerted the public that pesticides are toxic and worked to protect human health and the environment through her writing, speeches, and testimony before Congress in the 1950s.

Agitators’ central challenge is to articulate grievances with the status quo in ways that create common purpose among those who oppose it. Engaging directly and regularly with those who suffer from the problem and could benefit from change is essential to understanding the problem and its context, and to launching and supporting action against it.

In the case of Unis-Cité, Trellu-Kane and her cofounders did not agitate much at first. Instead, they focused on developing the service program. The major urban riots in France in 2005 brought the problems of exclusion and inequality among youth and the issue of youth civilian service into the limelight. The crisis meant that Unis-Cité did not need to agitate, because the need for change was clear to everyone. Indeed, soon after the riots, French President Jacques Chirac announced the establishment of a state-sponsored national youth civilian service program. Yet the subsequent election of President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 threatened the program: It was not clear whether the new government would continue to support it financially. At that time, Trellu-Kane, as the president of Unis-Cité, made it a priority to agitate to make the public aware of the dangers of letting youth civilian service disappear. To do so, she coordinated with other nonprofits involved in delivering youth service programs in the country and went to the press.

It is crucial for agitators to fully comprehend and respect the mental models of all stakeholders—allies, detractors, and fence-sitters alike.

Agitators can make a problem resonant in various ways, using combinations of appeals to reason, fairness, and emotion. Above all, it is crucial for agitators to fully comprehend and respect the mental models of all stakeholders—allies, detractors, and fence-sitters alike. What do they value? What are their assumptions? The same message may stir different emotions for different
audiences. Understanding interrelated habits of thought and action in a given social setting can enable agitators to tailor their communications to specific contexts and stakeholders.

Agitators often harness personal power based on their own firsthand experiences of the problem. They may reach out to group members who share these experiences and help others see commonality of both concern and purpose. Agitators may also increase the visibility of the problem and attract more support using their relational sources of power from social networks and their positional sources of power from formal authority. The Internet and, more specifically, social media platforms also provide opportunities to widen participation in the movement, teach relevant new skills, and democratize decision-making about common goals on a large scale. For example, social media played a critical role in enabling Sierra Leonean diaspora organizations to agitate and encourage other individuals, groups, and organizations to take action to address the Ebola crisis in 2015.17

Agitators face two main obstacles: that opponents of the status quo do not come together as a unified body that can enact change, and/or that the movement does not move beyond agitation to articulate a solution for the grievances. In the Occupy Wall Street movement that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, for example, agitators had success in raising awareness about problems associated with economic inequality and financial abuses, but the movement faded as it struggled to articulate a unified and specific solution.

Agitators should forestall these traps by evaluating the quantity and quality of their progress as they go. They should ask: Have changes in the social, political, economic, or physical setting altered the premise of the perceived problem? To what extent does the articulated common purpose resonate with different stakeholders? Agitators must be forward-looking and not accept short-term gains at the expense of long-term polarization. Movements that criticize without offering ideas about how to address the problems at hand constructively can become sterile and even counter-productive over time. Importantly, agitators need to establish favorable conditions for innovators and orchestrators.

Innovator
Innovators create actionable solutions to address problems identified by agitators. These solutions may be new or may draw on existing, proven approaches. Unis-Cité, for example, was modeled after the American nonprofit City Year.

Innovators must not only conceptualize possible solutions but also communicate them in appealing ways to encourage individuals, groups, and organizations to support them. They must also organize individuals and groups to cultivate alliances and cooperation. Like agitators, innovators should deeply understand the problem’s context, including institutional constraints, as well as the habits of thought and action of allies, detractors, and fence-sitters. They must deeply understand the individuals harmed by the problem and their social, political, economic, and physical context. Those whom innovators intend to serve may or may not turn out to be quick allies.

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Innovators often serve as bridges, drawing on their personal sources of power based on experience across multiple sectors. A degree of distance from the status quo in each sector can enable them to question taken-for-granted practices and imagine alternatives. For example, being outside the French context as an American, Unis-Cité cofounder Lisbeth Shepherd saw the potential to replicate City Year’s model in France and then proposed the idea to Trellu-Kane and Pache, who decided to join forces to launch the French program.

In fact, the Unis-Cité cofounders’ primary role was that of innovator. Their success in introducing youth service to France and bringing it to the attention of public officials initially came not from a large base of relational or positional power, but from their drive and passion for helping youth and
addressing some of the country’s most pressing social issues. They enhanced their relational power by slowly but surely building an expansive network of relationships with youth, local nonprofits, public authorities, the media, and corporations. Over time, Trellu-Kane also gained positional power as cofounder and president of the organization, as Unis-Cité became a key player in the field of youth service. This made her a legitimate interlocutor in the eyes of stakeholders.

All innovations risk missing their mark, and innovators face two main traps. The first is blindness to negative consequences. In addressing a symptom of the problem, leaders may unintentionally reinforce its roots and even create new symptoms. For example, people have advocated charging user fees for health services in poor communities to avoid waste and increase revenue for supplies and repairs. However, a Poverty Action Lab analysis of ten randomized evaluations found that even very small user fees can significantly lower access to preventive healthcare. The second main trap for innovators is the danger of coming up with an elegant solution without considering its practicality or likelihood of adoption. Like agitators, innovators must be forward-looking and keep orchestration in mind as they develop solutions. Without a solution that is feasible and capable of spreading throughout the sector, the movement is at risk and may not move beyond innovating.

To avoid these traps, it is essential that innovators develop a well-defined theory of change that connects the inputs and activities involved in the proposed solution to its outputs and impact. Innovators then can evaluate the solution’s efficacy through pilot testing and thereby generate the support necessary for orchestration.

**Orchestrator**

The role of orchestrator involves planning and leading the strategy for change adoption, in close coordination with the range of actors already behind the change, as well as those now asked to adopt it who may have fought it initially. On the one hand, orchestrators often need to tailor their communication to the various constituencies they need to persuade. On the other hand, they need to ensure that their overall message remains coherent enough to uphold the integrity of the movement. Our research reveals that orchestrators should not necessarily heed the old saying, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Leaders should always try to understand why some people resist the proposed change and to address their concerns. But cultivating close social
ties with these people may be counter-productive, especially when the change threatens their deep-seated norms. Instead, orchestrators should focus on nurturing their existing coalition and on cultivating close social ties with the fence-sitters.²⁵

Addressing the challenge of coordinating across groups of individuals, organizations, and sometimes sectors²⁶ often requires that orchestrators create forums for deliberation and strategic alignment, which can help maintain unity while building momentum. A movement may be an informal network that loosely connects people or a more formal coalition that systematically mobilizes participants. Either way, attention to internal processes and structures is critical as a movement for social change grows.

After Sarkozy’s administration finally decided to financially support youth civilian service in France, Trellu-Kane, who had started working with other French youth service nonprofits to agitate after Sarkozy’s election, realized that this coalition had to work to spread youth service in the country. She took the lead in creating a formal collective that worked together, co-published documents, and spoke with a unified voice about youth service. This work paid off: Unis-Cité, in collaboration with other nonprofits, convinced Sarkozy’s administration in 2010 to support a new law that contributed to institutionalizing youth service in France and led to the creation of a public organization to coordinate it at the national level.

All sources of power—personal, positional, and relational—are critical for orchestrators. But because effective orchestrators need to build and sustain an expansive network of relationships with constituents across groups, organizations, and sectors,²⁷ relational power is especially important. Orchestrators’ relational power enables them to identify and win allies, influence others, and access resources for change adoption.²⁸
Orchestrators face two main challenges: mission drift and dilution. As orchestrators bend to accommodate different interests and develop a sound organization and strategy, they need to make sure these activities serve the mission of change adoption and not merely the perpetuation and bureaucratization of the movement and the organizations it comprises. Orchestrators also need to be careful not to dilute their message too much as they tailor their discourse to different people they want to persuade. To avoid these traps, orchestrators need to identify milestones and regularly assess their progress toward short- and long-term goals.

**When to Play Which Role?**

Changing circumstances require people to play different roles at different times. When deciding whether to play the role of agitator, innovator, and/or orchestrator, leaders should ask: Is the environment ripe for change? Do viable sets of alternatives already exist? Is there coordination to ensure the diffusion of current solutions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Agitator</th>
<th>Innovator</th>
<th>Orchestrator</th>
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<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Highlight a problem that needs to be solved</td>
<td>Connect the innovation to the problem and explain why it is a superior solution</td>
<td>Tailor the message to different constituents while maintaining overall coherence and sustain collective action toward change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing</td>
<td>Launch collective action against the status quo</td>
<td>Build a coalition of supporters behind the proposed solution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Assess the extent to which agitation resonates with movement participants and establishes common purpose</td>
<td>Assess the extent to which the solution actually addresses the problem in a feasible way</td>
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<td>Traps</td>
<td>Fragmented agitation and stalled solution</td>
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In the case of Unis-Cité, Trellu-Kane and her cofounders initially focused on innovating, but they later needed to change their focus to agitating and orchestrating. This transition was not an easy one, as the new roles required different skills and sources of power, but it was critical to the adoption of youth service across France. Had Trellu-Kane and Unis-Cité not moved to an orchestrator role, the innovation they created might have never scaled.

It is also critical that leaders understand the sources of power required to successfully take on each of the three roles in various contexts, and that they are realistic about their own personal, relational, and positional sources of power. Too often, people prefer to put aside political considerations and focus only on the noble goal they wish to pursue. Far from helping, such an approach can be detrimental in the inherently political process of mobilizing for social change.

Participants in a movement for change also need to be aware of others’ sources of power. If they do not have the necessary sources of power, they can team up with others who do. Trellu-Kane and Unis-Cité initially did not have the relationships and positional power necessary to effectively
orchestrate, but after expanding their social network, they were able to perform that role when needed.

Last but not least, those participating in a movement for change should understand their individual motivations. Yet, what motivates a leader may change over time. A leader needs to persevere when momentum slows, new obstacles arise, and critics become louder.29

The Current Need for Social Change

Many now feel that the need for social change is becoming more acute, which makes understanding the roles of agitators, innovators, and orchestrators especially important. Waves of frustration with the status quo have erupted around the world and across the political spectrum, from Brexit in the United Kingdom to the Women’s March in the United States.

Citizens across demographic, generational, and political groups are trying to figure out how they can contribute to positive change in the social, economic, and political realms. Agitators are already afoot. The challenge is how to agitate with innovation and orchestration in mind, and within a culture of democracy that requires reasoned listening, deliberation, and adaptation to others’ concerns. At this moment, action at the community level can be a particularly effective way to learn through experimentation and demonstrate quick wins that offer an alternative to the status quo.

Martin Luther King, Jr., noted that social change leaders facing formidable challenges need to strike a delicate balance: “Accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” Hope requires a credible vision for how to move the needle from how the world is to how it should be.30 We can all contribute to moving the needle, be it as agitators, innovators, and/or orchestrators.

Notes

1 Two streams of research in organization studies, namely research on institutions and institutional change, and research on social movements, have contributed to better understanding what it takes to initiate and implement social change. For a detailed overview of the literature on institutions and institutional change, see Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Thomas B. Lawrence, and Renate E. Meyer, eds., The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017. For a detailed overview of the literature on social movements, see David A. Snow, S. A. Soule, and H. Kriesi, eds., The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements,


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