

NEON

Systemic Movement Primer

This primer has been written to help you think about the role of movements in society - their characteristics and some of their core features. It covers 3 major areas:

1. **Movement Characteristics:** their role, what makes them effective, systemic and common problems they face
2. **Movement DNA:** the core structure which allows it to reproduce over and over again whilst maintaining coherence
3. **Movement Action Plan:** how movements grow and develop and possibly decline over time

DEFINITIONS

A movement is...

A large decentralised set of groups and organisations working for a change in society. It has a basic theory of change and a coherence around the types of permissible action. Power is fairly spread out, and there is no central point of control. This leads to spontaneity and a diversity of tactics. It also fosters a collective sense of identification with the wider cause the movement champions. Movements needn't be systemic or choose their tactics wisely but they are, more often than not, a necessary part of any substantial progressive change.

Examples of movements include:

15-M movement in Spain

Occupy

Civil Rights movement

Anti-apartheid movement

Iraq war movement

1. MOVEMENT CHARACTERISTICS

What is the role of movements in society - what are some of their key characteristics and likely weaknesses.

THEIR ROLE

- » They bring mass pressure to bear to disrupt and replace the powerful
- » They transmit alternative stories for how society could operate. As a result they can change public opinion quickly in ways that mainstream culture could not
- » They create large numbers of new activists who are radicalised and have gained the skills needed to lead new action
- » They educate large numbers of people in the realities of political struggle and change
- » They can act quickly

FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE MOVEMENTS

These are some of the characteristics of effective movements that win. They...

- » **Bring mass pressure** to bear to disrupt and replace the powerful
- » **Address issues that are widely and directly felt**, around which people have a sense of grievance or injustice and through organising could create a sense of outrage and sense urgency
- » **Have a common purpose** with a vision and frame chosen to engage popular support
- » **Challenge power** and are clear about the power they are challenging
- » **Have momentum:** sometimes known as the organising cycle:
 - 1) Build popular support
 - 2) Escalate the situation by polarising the issue with an action, e.g. by creating a moral dilemma through “agitation and dramatic projects” that attract “mass sympathy and support” as explained by Martin Luther King
 - 3) Absorb the new energy before starting again

- » **Absorb and grow the leadership of large numbers of people** during moments of heightened activity into roles where they become committed activists
- » **Are led by those who are most affected** by the issue which gives the membership the courage to confront power - often in ways that require real danger and sacrifice
- » **Leadership is offered as service** and shown by the action and empowerment of others; movements are always based on **volunteerism**: paid staff exist to empower existing volunteers who make up the mass of the movement
- » **Are inclusive** to all those that agree to the movement's principles; anyone is welcome to use and adapt the tools and branding in their own way if they support the movement principles
- » **Value difference**: many roles and organisations are valued as important. This leads to many different approaches and tactics being used and people self-identifying as part of something bigger and decentralised
- » **Are transparent and democratic**: it is clear how decisions are made.

FEATURES OF SYSTEMIC MOVEMENTS

Drawing on our earlier Campaign Lab sessions, there are a couple of additional attributes needed for movements that act systemically:

- » **They target root causes**: by selecting the targets that yield substantial, lasting wins that help dismantle the existing system
- » **They offer solidarity across issues**: offering and accepting real solidarity across issues, recognising their role as part of something larger helping to create a movement of movements e.g. the 15-M movement in Spain or Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners
- » **They take self-care and internal culture seriously**: we're going to need to be around for a long time - reproduce cultures of oppression or we can't just burn out
- » **They are transformative for participants**: focusing on building the long-term strength and organising skills of those who participate

- » **They recognise their place in the broader ecosystem:** helping to build the power of others and recognising the importance of other power bases, allies and approaches

COMMON MOVEMENT PROBLEMS:

- » **Self-limiting DNA:** elements of its founding structure or principles render it unable to grow or adapt to new challenges
- » **Lack of political strategy:** it fails to choose the right targets and build momentum
- » **No absorption strategy:** it cannot integrate new members and loses potential energy
- » **Doesn't offer or build a lasting alternative:** without offering an alternative, old systems of oppression take back over once the movement inevitably lulls
- » **Doesn't understand its political position or becomes impatient:** the movement doesn't recognise the successes it has made - for example a substantial shift in public opinion
- » **Non-discipline:** the movement doesn't adhere to its culture and ends up losing public or internal support
- » **Ego:** those leading sections of the movements believe they *are* the movement and/or stifle other approaches
- » **Lack of clear leadership and direction:** leading to competing theories of change and/or gentle decline

2. MOVEMENT DNA

WHAT IS MOVEMENT DNA?

According to this theory, developed principally by our friends at the [Ayni Institute](#), movements are based around a DNA: a core structure which allows it to reproduce over and over again whilst maintaining coherence. It's rarely thought of in this way in the midst of struggle, but most movements do have an unwritten set of assumptions about the way people work within them. The tighter and clearer this DNA, the easier it is to maintain coherence and grow effectively without becoming self-limiting.

The DNA is often formed initially by a smaller group working together but is adapted as you grow. Once you have a DNA, you can begin to test it out and refine it, applying it to the various phases of movement building (e.g. through the use of ‘dilemma actions’ to build public support). DNA can be enabling or limiting which is why it’s important to interrogate what yours is.

Thinking about your DNA in a more structured way is crucial for developing, protecting it and going to scale effectively. DNA must then be communicated and embedded in everything you do – being passed on through experience and practice (like at mass trainings and on actions).

MOVEMENT DNA EXERCISE

Use the following table to write up your core DNA. Spend a long time doing this and really interrogating this as a group. It’s what your movement is built around; it’s onto this that individual campaigns, actions and tactics are grafted.

Element	Answer
<p>Political analysis: What is the problem you seek to solve. Who is your target? And what do you want to happen as a result of the movement?</p>	
<p>Grand Strategy: Broadly, how will you achieve your goal? e.g. Focus on building a critical mass of active public support for the cause. This stops you falling into the trap of seeking false victories or becoming inward looking. Your grand strategy might have several phases.</p>	
<p>Narrative: What are the public frames and messaging that you will use to describe your struggle?</p>	

Brand: How do people recognise and affiliate with your movement?	
Principal tactic: What will your core actions be? How can they be replicated easily and quickly by others? How can people engage in them?	
Absorption strategy: How will new people join your group and take on board your movement DNA as fast as possible? This requires moving them up a 'ladder of engagement' until they can run a group of their own.	
Culture: What values will you organise around to hold your discipline and keep the public on side e.g. non-violence?	
Leadership structure: How do decisions get made and how does leadership develop your next phase of strategy?	

EXAMPLE DNA: OCCUPY

This is an example of the DNA applied to the Occupy movement. It's useful for thinking about how simple and quick it was for the format to be replicated (951 cities across 82 cities by Oct 2011) but also for thinking about the elements of its founding DNA which stopped it achieving more of having sustaining power.

Element	Answer
Political analysis: What is the problem you seek to solve. Who is your target? And what do you want to happen as a result of the movement?	Our politics has been taken over by the 1% and principally Wall Street/the financial sector/big business are to blame.

<p>Grand Strategy: Broadly, how will you achieve your goal? e.g. Focus on building a critical mass of active public support for the cause. This stops you falling into the trap of seeking false victories or becoming inward looking. Your grand strategy might have several phases.</p>	<p>We must take back the spaces that have been claimed by the 1% using our bodies. By showing what an alternative could look like we can show a different way of working. Ultimately we can take back all of the spaces.</p>
<p>Narrative: What are the public frames and messaging that you will use to describe your struggle?</p>	<p>99% vs 1% #wearethe99%</p>
<p>Brand: How do people recognise and affiliate with your movement?</p>	<p>Fist symbol and anonymous mask.</p>
<p>Principal tactic: What will your core actions be? How can they be replicated easily and quickly by others? How can people engage in them?</p>	<p>Occupy spaces: Protest and persuasion, Political noncooperation.</p>
<p>Absorption strategy: How will new people join your group and take on board your movement DNA as fast as possible? This requires moving them up a 'ladder of engagement' until they can run a group of their own.</p>	<p>Attending a camp and experiencing a "General Assembly".</p>
<p>Culture: What values will you organise around to hold your discipline and keep the public on side e.g. non-violence?</p>	<p>Non-violent, consensus-based structure.</p>
<p>Leadership structure: How do decisions get made and how does leadership develop your next phase of strategy?</p>	<p>Gatherings based on consensus decision making with an overriding commitment to participatory democracy. Working groups take away key decisions to implement.</p>

3. MOVEMENT ACTION PLAN

This is an overview of the stages laid out in a framework called the [Movement Action Plan](#) (MAP). It's helpful for thinking about the stage that your movement may be at. In reality, movements aren't that predictable and stages could happen concurrently, faster or slower. MAP is useful for thinking about the kinds of interventions needed at different times and also for starting to think about the many cycles of work required to achieve long term change.

Stage	Description	Interventions you can make
1. Normal times	Unnoticed violations of widely held values like freedom, democracy, justice. Any opposition (by professionals, principled or grassroots) often ridiculed or ineffective, or both.	Activities that show a problem exists e.g. high profile direct action. Activities that maintain an active opposition, e.g. political education. Anything to get you to the next stage(s)!
2. Prove the failure of institutions	You try to prove the problem exists and that the power holders perpetuate it. Support grows but the problem is still not in the public spotlight.	Try every avenue for official participation: file complaints, start legal cases (whether you win or not), document all attempts to change the official position. Anything that reduces a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness in the movement.
3. Ripening conditions	Historical forces – long-term broad trends and events that worsen the problem – start to converge. The problem is still off the agenda, but support continues to grow.	These conditions are mostly outside of our control, but we can: support & inspire autonomous grassroots groups that emerge, experiment with new methods of opposition - including direct action and form bonds with existing movements.
4. Take off	A new movement bursts onto the scene. Usually started by a	Support all sorts of actions, create 'dilemma demonstrations', design

(The shortest stage)	“trigger” event or events (deliberate or accidental) that spark moral outrage and is followed by a sustained campaign of activities.	participatory grassroots events, promote activities to avoid burnout.
5. Perception of failure or an identity crisis	After some time, the excitement of the new movement turns to despair. Activists lose their faith, thinking change will never happen or that the movement hasn’t achieved anything (it has), or that it hasn’t changed enough (change takes time). Power holders seem even more powerful. ‘Invisible’ grassroots support is building, but public opinion is divided.	Switch from protest to long-term grassroots organising, develop organisational models to avoid informal hierarchy & the tyranny of structurelessness, use tools like the MAP to avoid despair, create support groups for burnt-out activists, deliver training to broaden activists skillsets for the long-haul.
6. Majority public opinion	The movement becomes a long-term popular struggle and erodes the social, political and economic supports that allow the power holders to continue. Professional, principled and grassroots campaigners are aligned. The movement achieves majority public support.	Developing a grand strategy, ongoing low-intensity organising, mass public education, base broadening, regional campaigns in strongest movement areas, rallies & demonstrations at critical times, citizen involvement programmes, respond to new trigger events, propose wide-ranging alternatives to the status-quo.
7. Success	The new social consensus turns the tide against the power holders and begins an endgame leading to the movement’s success, either through a <i>dramatic showdown</i> , a <i>quiet showdown</i> or <i>attrition</i> .	In the <i>dramatic showdown</i> scenario, the interventions often resemble those in Stage 4 (Take Off), in the <i>quiet showdown</i> and <i>attrition</i> scenarios it’s important to recognise your victory and start thinking about what next.
8. Continuation	Success is the basis for continuing the broader struggle. There’s also	Training to push people beyond single-issue activists, creating

important follow-up and defending of victories to be done. The movement can also make other demands. Also, new movements often form out of old movements.

ongoing grassroots organisations.

TAKING STOCK

Where do you think your movement currently sits on the MAP?

What are the main focuses that you would need to take you to the next stage of the action plan?

*This model is the end result of a lot collective thinking and practice.
NEON led the synthesis of these insights to create the model with the support of the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) and Teju Adeleye. PIRC designed the model and made it beautiful.*

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