

CHANGE!
A Student Guide to Social Action

Scott J. Myers-Lipton

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STUDENT VICTORIES

- In 2007, *Students Against Sweatshops* got the San José State University (SJSU) President to sign an executive order creating a sweatshop-free campus.
- In 2008, *Students for EOP* led the successful campaign, along with faculty to reinstate the SJSU Education Opportunity Program (EOP).
- In 2010, *Collective Voices for Undocumented Students* won their campaign to allow AB 540 (undocumented) students to use computers from Clark Hall and to receive certain SJSU scholarships.
- In 2011, *Students for Campus Safety* won two of their demands: (1) to have an opt out system rather than an opt-in system for SJSU Action Alerts, (2) to extend the SJSU shuttle service to six blocks off the campus.
- In 2012, the *Campus Alliance for Economic Justice (CAFÉ J)* developed and helped to lead the San Jose Measure D campaign, which won 60% to 40% in the November election, which raised the minimum wage from \$8 to \$10 an hour.
- In 2014, *Students for Racial Equality* led a successful campaign to remove Tower Foundation board member Wanda Ginner after making a racist comment about Latinas.
- In 2015, *Students for DMH* won their demand for air conditioning in Dudley Moorehead Hall.
- In 2015, *College Action Network* won their demand for the institutionalization of a college tour program for third graders that they had developed.
- In 2015, the *Society for Teaching Responsible Options in Nutrition and Growth (STRONG)* worked with food vendors to win three changes to city regulations making it easier and more accessible for fresh carts to sell fresh fruit and vegetables.
- In 2016, *Students for a World-Class City* developed Measure G, the Modernization of the Business Tax, which won 65% to 35% in the November 2016 election, and doubled the business tax by almost \$13 million, focusing on mid to large corporations, with the majority of the money going to fund infrastructure projects.

*This book is dedicated to all of the college students
who want to bring about a more democratic, equitable, and just world.*

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Chapter 2

Setting the Tone

In this opening week of the academic term, it is extremely important to set the right tone for the journey ahead. To set the right tone for your campaign, the first topic that must be addressed is whether you believe that social change is even possible. I have come to learn that many of my students, deep down, don't believe that social change is possible. They might give lip service to it, and they might even cite the suffragette movement or the civil rights movement as an example that change is possible. However, many students don't believe that *they* can bring about social change. This is not surprising to me since most major decisions in the public sphere seem to be in the hands of others, and they are given little opportunity to help make decisions that affect society. Furthermore, their high school and college experience, and perhaps your experience, have led them (and maybe you) to believe that your voice doesn't matter, since many classrooms are filled with "teacher talk", with the teacher or professor upfront and the students in rows, taking notes silently. However, social action is about democracy, so you will be expected to engage and participate actively. In order to set the right tone, be aware that from the very beginning of this social action experience you will be expected to participate actively.

Redefining Leadership: Seeing Yourself as a Leader

You will be called upon to be a leader in this social action project. However, the problem is that you might not see yourself as a leader. This is the result of a narrow definition of leadership, which assumes that leaders are people who are charismatic, dynamic, visionary, and powerful. In this definition, leaders are people that stand up and give an inspirational speech, or take control in a situation, and they make something happen. These leaders are always out in front, leading the pack. Unfortunately, this type of leadership excludes many people who are more quiet and reserved, or don't see themselves as public speakers or visionary, and often times disempowers people in the group, since if they don't fit this description of a leader, they conclude that they must be followers.

A more inclusive and empowering definition of leadership is needed if we are to get more people engaged in solving social problems. I believe that leadership should be defined as someone who thinks about the group and helps it function effectively. This definition of leadership allows for all of us to become leaders, and is not based in having more influence or power in the group. To become a leader, what we need to do is to spend time thinking about what are the needs of the group, and to put forward creative solutions to the problems that

the group is facing. In other words, the person is a leader if she takes responsibility for the group.⁸

In your social action campaign, you will have many opportunities to take leadership in this non-oppressive fashion. In your group, there will be many problems to solve: everything from how the group functions, to how your group recruits new members, to how the group works with the media. All of these problems will take the best thinking of the group members. The goal is to get as many people involved in coming up with solutions to these group problems as possible. In a campaign, there are hundreds of details to consider and to do, so it needs all group members to contribute in order to be successful. Of course, there is an action component to this definition of leadership, but with more people involved in the group process, it opens up the possibility for more people to engage in the more traditional leadership activities, like giving a speech or leading a march.

Below are some qualities and skills that you may want to consider developing so that you can effectively contribute to your group. You may have been born with them, or you may have developed them as a result of your family life or through sports. Whatever the case, you should be aware that these leadership qualities exist, and they can help you and your group to be effective. These qualities include:

- **Becoming a good listener**

Earlier models of leadership focus on the great communicator, whether that be President Ronald Reagan or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, César Chávez, the co-founder and organizer for the United Farm Workers (UFW), reminds us that it is necessary to be a good listener. César spent a great deal of time listening to his fellow farmworkers, realizing that it was important to hear their ideas and stories if they were to achieve the UFW goal to negotiate with businesses through collective bargaining. At one meeting, when it was unclear how to move forward, and Cesar admitted he had no good response, it was the voice of an elderly female farmworker who provided the answer on what the next step of the campaign should be. She started by saying “Well, I know I am not qualified, but there was something. I had an idea, maybe just a small idea, but maybe it can help”, and she went on to describe that since the UFW had been barred from organizing at the farmworker camps where the workers lived, that they should create a small church on the public roadway across from the camps to attract the workers to come and visit. Cesar and the UFW listened, and they decided to do exactly as this

“unqualified”, elderly farmworker suggested. Thus, it is critical that we listen to all in the group. It is also important to ask good questions, such as: “What are your thoughts?”, “How does it make you feel?”, and “What if...?” These open-ended questions will allow you to hear from people what they are thinking and feeling.⁹

- **Becoming comfortable talking in a small group and in public**
Learning to speak in a small group and in public doesn't mean you have to be the person to deliver the major address at an event, or speak all of the time in the group. However, it does mean that when the opportunity presents itself, you are able to communicate to others effectively. Thus, if someone asks you about the campaign, whether it be a fellow student in a class, the president of the University, or the press, you must learn to articulate clearly what the campaign is about. It is not necessary for all group members to be dynamic speakers, but everyone should be able to explain what is the demand, who is the target, how will the solution make our community better, and what motivated them to be involved in the campaign. In addition, all people should be comfortable speaking to the group about their concerns and issues.
- **Becoming aware of how the group is “feeling”**
A major part of whether your group is successful is how the group works together. If members feel good about the working relationships in the group, there is a much higher chance of being successful. Thus, it is very important to become aware of the group dynamics. Is the group feeling good about how they are working together, or is their discontentment? Do members have negative feelings about the group that are not being talked about? Are people frustrated that some people are doing more work than others, or that some people are dominating the discussion? Are people sharing power? If you see that the group is not working well together, you need to take responsibility to talk to the people that have these feelings, and see if it can be worked out individually, or perhaps in the larger group.¹⁰
- **Having integrity**
Be honest in all of your dealings with the group. In addition, don't say anything about group members that you would not say to their face. Lastly, if you say you are going to do something, make sure it gets done. This ability to accomplish what you say you are going to do helps the group immensely. So if you tell people you are going to do

something, do it. If for some reason you can't get it done, tell the group, and ask for help to get it done.

- **Understanding how privilege operates and learning to work with groups who are “different” than you**
Society provides more status and privilege to people, depending on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, educational attainment, immigration status, and religious affiliation. The more you learn about yourself and your own identity and privileges (or lack of), as well as the identity and privileges of others, the better. This understanding of privilege, and its intersectionality, will help you to better understand the dynamics of the group, as well as the relationships between the group and your allies.
- **Being persistent**
Persistence is perhaps one of the most important qualities of being a leader. The most effective leaders are the ones who when they wake up in the morning, they think about what can they do today to move the campaign forward, and when they go to bed at night, they think about what can they do tomorrow. To be a leader, there is a certain level of stick-to-it-iveness that is absolutely critical.
- **Learn to say “no”**
If you have the above qualities and skills, or are developing them, people from other groups will see that you are a “leader”, and will ask you to become involved in their issues. While this may be flattering, learn to say “no, with a smile.” You do not want to get into a situation where you take on too many things and become burned out. Learn to say with a smile, “thank you so much for that invitation to work on this project, but I am focused on this campaign right now.”

In addition, this book provides the opportunity to develop some specific skills. These skills are highly valued in society, and they will help you get a job in the non-profit, public or private sectors. These skill include how to:

- facilitate a meeting
- conduct research
- recruit members
- work with the media
- work in a group effectively
- plan events for an entire campaign
- fundraise
- confront and negotiate with a target
- evaluate your project

In this social action campaign, you will have the opportunity to practice and develop these skills. Some of these skills may be more appealing to you than others, and it will be up to you to decide which skills you may want to develop.

Plato's Cave

Twenty three hundred years ago, Plato, the Greek philosopher, wrote the Allegory of the Cave (see: <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/platoscave.html>). In Plato's cave, he imagines that a group of people have been chained down from birth and are unable to move their heads to see behind them, where there is a fire throwing up images of objects on the cave's wall in front of the prisoners. The chained-down people think these objects are real and alive, as they are not aware that they are shadows of objects. However, a person breaks free, turns around, and becomes aware of the reality of the situation. At the top of the cave, there is an opening, and the person ascends out of it. Upon exiting the cave, the person is bathed in the light of the sun (i.e., wisdom), and is able to see reality clearly. Soon after, the person returns to the cave to inform the people about what was observed.

Plato's cave provides insight into whether humans are truly free, who is controlling society (and its images) and for what purpose, what is the process to liberate our minds, and what will happen to us once our minds are liberated and we engage with others in society. As you begin your social action project, reflecting on these insights will be extremely helpful as you set the right tone for you and your group.

GROUP EXERCISE

1. The below questions start the process of moving you away from being a receptor of knowledge to an active creator, and moving the professor or staff away from being a sage on the stage to a guide on the side that facilitates your learning process. It also begins the process of helping you to understand your thoughts about social change.

- a. What do you know about social change?
- b. How does social change take place?
- c. Why would someone become involved in social change?
- d. Do you believe that social change is possible?

2. Please discuss the following questions:

- a. What does the fire, shadows, and cave represent?
- b. What is the ascent out of the cave represent?
- c. What happens to people who decide to go back into the cave?
- d. How might service-learning, which is the integration of civic action and academic concepts, help us to get of the cave?

e. How does Plato's cave apply to us today?

3. In your group, please reflect on the following questions about leadership:

- a. What are your thoughts about the traditional and the new definition of leadership described above? When you think of traditional leadership, what are the images that come to mind?
- b. In previous group experiences, how has "leadership" played out? Has leadership been shared and has everyone had the opportunity to exercise leadership? How have you had to deal with people not "taking responsibility for the group and relying on others, or the opposite, where a person has been too dominant?
- c. Which is your strongest and weakest leadership quality and skill, as described above? What quality and skill would you like to develop in this campaign?
- d. How will your group make sure that you have shared leadership, and that all are contributing their ideas and actions