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The Five Core Practices of Effective Leadership for Social Justice



Social Justice Leadership orients its work around three spheres of activity and influence, all of which dynamically interact to contribute to the successes (and failures) of grassroots efforts to create a more progressive set of societal values and government policies. The three spheres are the individual, the organization, and the movement. We view our work as improving the effectiveness and impact of individuals, organizations, and the social justice movement, particularly as they relate to each other.

The 5 practices of leadership for the social justice arena identify core behaviors that can provide an anchor for individuals and organizations amidst the chaos and pressure of organizing, campaigns, and confronting politically reactionary forces in society. The practices, if embraced conscientiously, can make manifest on a day-to-day basis the values that drive social justice work; and they hold the potential to move our individual and organizational behavior into greater collective coherence.

1. Acting from Center

Acting from Center is the practice of engaging work and life from the place where we have the most balance, poise, thoughtfulness, and power. Acting from Center recognizes that many things threaten to throw us off balance, but that our greatest strength lies in our ability to return to Center and respond to life with clarity, effectiveness, and precision rather than react from a place of unbalanced thought, emotion, or action.

2. Interdependence

Interdependence is the practice of being in relationship with people and organizations from a place of intent, rather than mere happenstance or habit. This practice acknowledges that we cannot reach success alone, and that all relationships large and small will better meet the needs of the parties if they are approached with attention and intention. Interdependence recognizes that social justice organizations will ultimately only be successful if the broader movement is successful, and that an important component of our work therefore must be movement-building.

3. Deepening Ideology

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Deepening Ideology is the practice of consciously framing the work in a political and social change context. It is the practice of rigorously vetting and aligning the goals, strategies, actions, and activities of the work against the larger political aspirations and societal transformation that we seek. To practice Ideology it must manifest most sharply in Vision, Purpose, and Worldview.

4. Sustainable High Performance

To practice Sustainable High Performance means consistently holding a very high standard for achieving goals and producing outcomes, while at the same time attending to personal and organizational well-being for the long-haul. This practice emphasizes the need for high output and recognizes that a fundamental building block of performance is the health and balance of the people and the organization itself.

5. Building Power Strategically

Building Power Strategically is the practice of conducting base-building, developing leadership, and building alliances and campaigns in a way that strategically builds power not only for the organization but also for the movement. This practice reminds us of the need to adopt a long-term orientation that moves beyond tactical defensive fights and coalitions, and instead develops strategies and campaigns that build alignment and power across organizations and have greater impact on policy, power relationships, and public consciousness.

Acting From Center

Acting from Center is the practice of engaging work and life from the place where we have the most balance, poise, thoughtfulness, and power. Acting from Center recognizes that many things threaten to throw us off balance, but that our greatest strength lies in our ability to return to Center and respond to life with clarity, effectiveness, and precision rather than react from a place of unbalanced thought, emotion, or action.

You know you are living the practice of Acting from Center...

at the *Individual Level* when you:

- take time each day to consciously place your attention on your center;
- respond to incoming pressure by seeking to come to center (such as breathing into your belly);
- notice when you're body is carrying tension or is experiencing some type of anxiety-related muscular contraction (such as furrowing the brow, clenching jaw, holding breath) – and your first response after noticing is to release the tension and relax;
- have regular practices, such as meditation or yoga, that explicitly help you come to center;

at the *Organization Level* when your organization:

- has group practices that move staff to be more centered: Centering, Meditation, Yoga, Reflective writing, etc;
- takes time to reconnect to Vision and Values on a regular and consistent basis;

at the *Movement Level* when you

- cultivate presence and centeredness in allies;
- demonstrate and explain to allies how group practices in your organization have improved overall effectiveness;

... and many other things that have yet to be discovered.

Interdependence

Interdependence is the practice of being in relationship with people and organizations from a place of intent, rather than mere happenstance or habit. This practice acknowledges that we cannot reach success alone, and that all relationships large and small will better meet the needs of the parties if they are approached with attention and intention. Interdependence recognizes that social justice organizations will ultimately only be successful if the broader movement is successful, and that an important component of our work therefore must be movement-building.

You know you are living the practice of Interdependence...

at the *Individual Level* when you:

- are fully present for all interactions with others;

- take responsibility for your intentions and behaviors when interacting with others;
- listen to others deeply and actively;
- communicate authentically with others;

at the Organization Level when your organization:

- has internal communication that is authentic and direct;
- has regular practices for building active listening skills;
- has regular, established systems for offering and acting on feedback;

at the Movement Level when you:

- communicate authentically with allies;
- act in a manner that builds rather than competes with other organizations;
- conduct strategic planning beyond the level of the organization, in order to align vision, strategy, and resources with other organizations;

... and many other things that have yet to be discovered.

Deepening Ideology

Deepening Ideology is the practice of consciously framing the work in a political and social change context. It is the practice of rigorously vetting and aligning the goals, strategies, actions, and activities of the work against the larger political aspirations and societal transformation that we seek. To practice Ideology it must manifest most sharply in Vision, Purpose, and Worldview.

You know you are living the practice of Deepening Ideology...

at the Individual Level when you:

- have clarity on your purpose, niche, or the legacy you want to leave behind;
- have a vision for your life's work and the political impact you want to make;
- analyze issues in the context of your worldview; and
- take time to develop your understanding of major political ideologies and to develop your own;

at the Organization Level when your organization:

- makes explicit its organizational theory of social change; and
- seeks to ensure that campaign and organizational goals are consistent with the organization's larger world view;

at the Movement Level when you:

- encourage allies to think and plan against a larger political and ideological background;
- educate allies on Theory of Social Change and other frameworks for examining how ideology, vision, and long-term goals manifest in an organization's work;
- support and participate in political education sessions, study groups, long-term visioning retreats etc. for the movement as a whole;

... and many other things that have yet to be discovered.

Sustainable High Performance

To practice Sustainable High Performance means consistently holding a very high standard for achieving goals and producing outcomes, while at the same time attending to personal and organizational well-being for the long-haul. This practice emphasizes the need for high output and recognizes that a fundamental building block of performance is the health and balance of the people and the organization itself.

You know you are living the practice of Sustainable High Performance...

at the Individual Level when you:

- take responsibility for caring for yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually;
- build restorative activities (meditation, yoga, exercise, etc.) into your regular schedule to improve personal health and prevent burnout;

- have a clear, attainable plan for your own personal growth and development;
- set and achieve consistently high standards for the outcomes of your work;

at the *Organization Level* when your organization:

- fosters innovative and creative thinking among members and staff;
- achieves significant, regular, concrete victories that improve members lives, affect broader policy change and resource allocation, and forward your vision for social change;
- supports its members and staff in living with their personal health in balance with their long term struggle for social justice;

at the *Movement Level* when you:

- support the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of individual and organizational allies;
- conduct strategic movement planning with allies around common vision, analysis, strategy, and allocation of resources;
- plan for and win victories that benefit important movement constituencies and organizations beyond your own organization;

... and many other things that have yet to be discovered.

Building Power Strategically

Building Power Strategically is the practice of conducting base-building, developing leadership, and building alliances and campaigns in a way that strategically builds power not only for the organization but also for the movement. This practice reminds us of the need to adopt a long-term orientation that moves beyond tactical defensive fights and coalitions, and instead develops strategies and campaigns that build alignment and power across organizations and have greater impact on policy, power relationships, and public consciousness.

You know you are living the practice of Building Power Strategically...

at the *Individual Level* when you:

- ensure that all the work you do, from large projects to small tasks, will have a positive impact in the long-term;
- have clarity about how every action, tactic, and activity helps build power for the organization or movement, and if they don't you adjust the plans so that they do; and
- devote time and resources to the growth and development of your own skills, qualities, and political consciousness;

at the *Organization Level* when your organization:

- has rituals, habits, systems and mechanisms in place to ensure that all campaign and organizational plans have goals that connect to a big-picture analysis and long-term vision;
- conducts leadership development with grassroots leaders that helps them develop a political analysis, develop skills, increase their leadership qualities, and evolve their formal and informal roles over time;
- supports the development of staff to be multi-faceted generalists who can play a variety of important roles within the organization, in addition to having specialized skills and knowledge; and
- regularly uses power analysis tools to update the political landscape and for tactical and strategic initiatives;

at the *Movement Level* when you

- help allies ensure their work is focused on building power for the movement as a whole over the long-term;
- devote time and resources to activities that help build the capacity of the movement, even if you or your organization don't directly and immediately benefit;

... and many other things that have yet to be discovered.