

Grass-Root Movements – Why Are they Failing Digging Deeper

By Daniel J. Basta

This essay was motivated by an article¹ promoting strategies for change. My views for inducing change through Grass-Root Movements differ from those of the author. However, I thoroughly commend the author's commitment to change.

My conclusions about driving change are based on 45 years of experience, that can be described as working in the “belly of the beast” for change, as my colleagues and I had worked to improve environmental quality, protect natural resources, and to reduce consumptive use and other destructive behaviors in the U.S. and abroad. In the sixties and seventies, and perhaps even into the early eighties, we had been convinced we could fix these perplexing problems, unfortunately we did not. This grand failure had led me on a path to re-examine why we continue to fail, especially when we know what to do.

Most advocates and practitioners working for change that I worked with had inevitably follow in the footsteps of noble efforts that had failed to produce significant results at a scale(s) that made big differences; no matter how passionate, connected, financed, or well publicized their efforts had been. But one thing that the author had right was that creating a bottom-up momentum – grass roots – may be the only hope to induce significant change in today's world.

The problem has become: “Why do well trained, smart, and dedicated professionals continue to create and execute plans that never quite get there; and then a decade or so later recognize failure and essentially do the same thing all over again with similar outcomes?” It has begged answering for some time, “What is wrong with this picture?” This is the problem that I had come to ponder, explore and challenge. There are many complexities that must be unraveled to answer

¹ “The Quest,” By Laurene Powell Jobs in the June, 17, 2018 issue of The Washington Post Magazine.

this question. To keep it simple I describe briefly below a few of the overriding concepts that I have come to believe.

First, is that the majority of practitioners in most fields today are still often prisoners of their training and the norms of their discipline. Proposed solutions, even thought by many to be innovative, also haven't reached across intellectual divides, nor have found ways to take deeper thinking into consideration. For example, incorporating a new understanding of the human behaviors, which are behind the usual suspected drivers that plans and programs address. When inspected closely, most plans and programs advocate solutions that are often simply "spins" or versions of past solutions and tend to address past metrics that are comfortable and accepted. A famous management consult had said, "All programs will only seek to achieve the metrics by which they are measured." The metrics measured are often never challenged, nor are the principles and approaches individuals have been trained to utilize. I know this because I had been one of those practitioners. In graduate and undergraduate school, students are so busy trying to learn the mechanics of a subject, that they never challenge them. And then when they begin to apply them, they are too busy trying to put them into effect and to satisfy peer communities, they almost never think more about them. In my case, it had taken almost 30 years working at the highest scientific and resource and environmental management levels for me to pause and question why we fail. Overcoming the inertia that leads to failure is extraordinarily difficult.

Second, is there has always been a lack of understanding as to where in the hierarchy of geographies – national, regional, state, county, municipal, neighborhood or community – a bottoms-up or grass roots effort can be orchestrated to generate large scale effects across all geographies. The design and orchestration of such approaches is not taught. These approaches often run counter to training and standard norms. Such approaches represent a strategic mind-set that understands, embraces, and converges "chaos." The very notion, however, of creative chaos is an anathema in most circles.

To be effective a grass root approach must, by definition, be originated at the community level. In some sense, success at this level is analogous to a proof of concept. Enlisting individuals and institutions first at this level is the “art” of a grass roots approach. There is no one answer of how to this, because it is often a trial-and-error process to reveal the true “drivers” that motivate individuals and their institutions in a community to a task at hand. (Some of the comments below provide insight into the motivation challenge). Part of the challenge once a community is motivated is to then, in time, enlist others in the geography of action above them in the hierarchy – a municipality, a county, a state, etc. Depending on perceived urgency it can often take up to a decade to achieve a lasting outcome of scale across geographies. Persistence and adaptability must be key attributes of a grass root approach.

Third, and the most difficult concept to explain, and therefore understand and appreciate, are the emerging insights into how the protocols of the human mind implicitly drive all actions. This is a very difficult subject area to explain, especially in practical terms. It’s fair to say that many in today’s marketing world take advantage of these protocols. For example, selecting out individuals to sell specific items, based on an assessment of an individual’s preferences, or an assessment of preferences across a group or in an area or geography. Grass-root or bottom-up approaches can learn from aspects of how the marketing world and now the political world influence an individual’s action(s).

A discourse on this subject could and probably does fill volumes. However, there a few things to point out about the idea that the protocols which determine how our minds work, can be used to create and orchestrate bottom-up outcomes that can generate powerful effects across all geographies. Ultimately, it is the sum of effects at the grass-root level that have the power to drive change. But realizing this is not enough. We have to dig deeper to understand why we behave the way we do in order to “appropriately”²alter behavior.

² Appropriately used in this context is a loaded term to many. Who decides what is appropriate is always the debate. In this context appropriate is ultimately decided a community or by society.

Marketeers have figured out aspects our preferences, by digging into our habits about what we spend money on, read, watch, or acquire, etc. They have dug into data on our spending habits to determine them; but they have not sought to discover the fundamental questions of why the preferences are so at any point. It's not important to them. However, unlocking the why question is the single greatest challenge to create effective grass-root campaigns. For example, to understand why "more" is always better? And does this norm or protocol drive our mass consumptive behavior, regardless of need or utility. Why is it that we feel "good" when we acquire or buy something? Do we understand why "faster" is always better. Is it important to be faster than the car next to us and to take off after a traffic light turns green? Is it because it makes us feel good? Why is dominance over someone, actually anything, always good, and part of our behavior? A particularly good example in this discussion is: "Why does a dead whale or dolphin on the beach illicit feelings of loss and commitment, while a hundred dead fish doesn't." There are many examples of how we react and behave without weighing a decision or even thinking a conscious thought. Such much is going on in the background of our minds that determine our actions or the buying preferences a Marketeer can detect.

If we are, collectively, serious about influencing change and grass-root movements are to play a big part, then basing our approaches on a new understanding of the drivers behind our behavior(s) will be required. The challenge is how can this understanding be incorporated into actual programming to effect change. It is a daunting task constrained by the application of conventional approaches and metrics which have brought us to where we are now. I have experimented with a number of programs and projects that led me to conclude that it can be done. My sense is that only by capitalizing on these ideas and taking them further will it be possible to create a "Tipping Point" to induce and manage our response to the rapidly evolving changes around us. Failure to do so will continue business as usual – too little too late and a future impossible to influence or predict.

About the Author. Daniel J. Basta was the Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), within the U.S. Department of

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