

Objective:

- 🕒 To understand the different ways non-violent movements can bring about change and the importance of these different mechanisms when selecting tactics.

Time needed:

120 minutes.

Resources needed:

Mechanisms of Change Quotations, post-it notes or small pieces of paper or cards, and pens/pencils.

How it's done:

1. Before the exercise begins put up "Mechanisms of Change Quotations" on the wall. Ask people to circulate and read the quotations and definitions. Then divide people up into four different groups. Give each group a quotation and definition pertaining to one of the four mechanisms of change: persuasion, accommodation, coercion and disintegration.
2. Each group then spends time in small group discussion - 15-20 minutes. Ask people to read the definition and the quote together and then to share their gut responses to the quote/s and definition. Ask groups to go through and write down key words that they feel are particularly important.
3. After about 15-20 minutes when groups have written down key words. Ask them to develop a tableaux (or body sculptures) that represents that definition and quote/s.
4. Each group then presents their tableaux. After each tableau invite members of the small group modelling the tableau to one at a time look at the tableau. Then ask each group to read the quote/s and definition.
5. After all four groups have presented their tableaux ask each group to share their key words by placing them down on the floor. Invite people to walk around and look at the key words. Ask what people notice? Are there any comments or questions?
6. Generalisation and application. Move into discussion. What mechanism of change do you think will be required in the contexts the group is working in? Why? Is that the case for all campaigns for peace, justice and the protection of the environment? What different mechanisms work to help pull away different pillars of support in your campaigns? What tactics work best for each method (there is an option here to list campaigns, pillars and tactics in relation to different mechanisms of change).

Other notes:

Source: CANVAS Core Curriculum: A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle (pp. 63-64):

Different campaigns in your movement may rely on different mechanisms of change to be successful. You may rely on some mechanisms, such as conversion or accommodation as you build up strength in the earlier phases of your movement, and only aim for coercion or disintegration in later phases [or you may come to the conclusion that your campaign can be won solely through the mechanisms of conversion and/or accommodation.] Furthermore, you may want to aim to use different mechanisms of change with different groups (for example, you may aim to convert or accommodate groups or individuals that are more likely to agree with you, but attempt to coerce or disintegrate the power of groups or individuals that are very unlikely to agree with you).

Even within a single group, different mechanisms may be active. For example, if you are struggling against a government, if you focus some of your actions on the army as a pillar of support (which it almost always is), your movement may find that it is easier to:

- *Convert the enlisted and lower-ranking troops on the street, both because they often have less invested in the current system than the officers and higher-ranks, and also because they are often the easiest to reach with your message and tactics;*
- *Accommodate the middle ranks and officers; and*
- *Aim to coerce the inner circle of those who are most loyal to the regime, because they have the most invested in the current system and the price of their openly supporting your movement is very high.*

However, this is only an example. Different struggles have different circumstances. For example, you may be able to find sympathetic generals or others who are close to your opponent who may be willing to subtly help your movement. This has happened in some historical cases of non-violent struggle such as the Philippines, Chile, Egypt and other places.

Some tactics and methods of non-violent action are better at enabling certain mechanisms of change.

Here's another example. In a campaign I was involved in to secure a community garden against the wishes of virulent opposition from the local government representative and a group of hostile neighbours we (the campaign organisers) sought to *convert* people passionate about gardening to become active in the campaign and *accommodate* neighbours who lived adjacent to the garden by addressing their concerns in the design of the proposed garden. The campaign did not rely on disintegration as a mechanism of change but we did use a form of

coercion to shift the local government representative. Our strategy included demonstrating overwhelming public support from key constituencies and large numbers of residents, and winning over key allies of the political party in power. The local councillor still did not change her mind and in the end was forced to resign from the local party because of growing local demand for a community garden and increasing political isolation from within her own party.

It is useful to use this tool in conjunction with the Mattress Game and to refer to the dynamics that took place in the mattress game during the section on discussion. The mattress game, mechanisms of change, and circle of truth tool all really go together. These three tools cover critically important foundational theory on strategic non-violent action: the consent theory of power, mechanisms of change and patterns of obedience.

Handout | Mechanisms of change quotations

Conversion

"It is the acid test of nonviolence that in a nonviolent conflict there is no rancour left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted into friends."

Gandhi

"To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."

Martin Luther King Jnr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1957.

Accommodation

"Accommodation occurs when the opponent does a cost-benefit analysis and arrives at the conclusion that a compromise settlement is a more favorable option than facing continued resistance. The opponent has neither changed its views nor been violently coerced, but instead has chosen accommodation because it is feeling pressure from the nonviolent movement. The opponent's choice is usually a reflection of the fact that the nonviolent movement is growing in power and building up a "winning record" of victories on a variety of limited, but important, issues. An opponent will also be more likely to choose accommodation if that choice will help improve its public image and if it is not being asked to grant concessions on issues that are fundamental to its continued rule."

CANVAS, A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle, p. 59.

"Humanitarians in government or in the general population may oppose the cause of the resisters, but also want to protect an image of themselves as decent, tolerant persons. In order to protect the second ... they may yield to the first. For them the costs of terrorization and brutality have become greater than the costs of ... whatever the resisters were contending for. Or opponents may ... no longer consider the central issue to be as important as they once did.... They would still like to have their own way on [it] ... but ...continuing the struggle is not worth it."

Harvey Seifert, Conquest by Suffering, pp. 73-74.

Coercion

"Coercion occurs when the opponent is forced, against its will, to meet the demands of the nonviolent movement or campaign. The opponent loses effective control over the situation as a result of civilians' widespread noncooperation and defiance. This indicates that the opponent's real power is being significantly undermined by the actions of the nonviolent movement. However, some or all of the opponent's officials still preserve their positions and the system has not disintegrated."

CANVAS, *A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle*, p. 61.

"Perhaps we at CORE have failed to show how effective and virile the nonviolence can be ... we must show that nonviolence is something more than turning the other cheek that it can be aggressive within the limits a civilized order will permit. Where we cannot influence the heart of the evil doer, we can force an end to the evil practice."

James Farmer, nonviolent activist and organiser, Committee for Racial Equality.
CORE was one of the groups active during the civil rights struggle in the United States during the 1960s.

"Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found the exact amount of injustice and wrong that will be imposed on them; and these will continue until they are resisted with words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

Fredrick Douglass, *Letter to an abolitionist associate*, 1849

Disintegration

"The opponent is not just coerced, but in addition its system of rule disintegrates and falls apart as a result of sustained, widespread, civilian-based noncooperation and nonviolent disruption. Massive noncooperation deprives the opponent of its sources of power to such an extent that its system of control simply dissolves."

CANVAS, *A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle*, p. 62.

Source:

Jason MacLeod, The Change Agency, <http://www.thechangeagency.org>

These works are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License.

You are free to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work under these conditions: attribution to the Change Agency and www.thechangeagency.org, and the original author/publisher (listed under 'Source'); only using this work for non-commercial purposes; share alike (if you alter, transform, or build upon this work, distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one).