

Mattress Game

(pillars of support)

Objective

- 🕒 To clarify the principle that government or ruling authority depends on the cooperation of the people, and non-cooperation is therefore powerful and can even, under some circumstances, overthrow dictatorships

Time needed

60 minutes

Resources needed

One mattress (bunk, twin, or regular), butchers paper / newspaper / flap, markers, a handout of successful non-violent struggles.

How it's done

1. Explain that this game explores power dynamics by using the example of governmental rule (or another form of injustice if the group so decides). Connect to previous ideas in the workshop if appropriate. Ask: "What are the forms of support that a government needs to exist?" List on newspaper. If some are forgotten (especially the army, police, international finance, citizen obedience), add them.
2. Divide up the group into small groups - one for each "pillar of support". Make sure everyone knows what "pillar of support" they are playing. Ask each group to nominate a person or pair or three (if it is a large group) to play the role of the a "pillar of support". They will get to represent that form of support in the game. Ask participants to raise their hands to indicate who identifies with which support, to clarify before the next step.
3. Bring the mattress to the centre and explain that it symbolises the government. Explain that in a moment those people representing the "pillars of support" for the government will raise the mattress together and that the task of everyone else is to persuade them to walk away from holding the mattress up and join the movement. But for now those people who have been nominated as playing a "pillar of support" will leave the room. The "pillars of support" then leave the room with a facilitator.

The facilitator (now outside the room) clarifies the task of those people playing "pillars of support": each pillar is to think about: 1. why ordinary people that make up this pillar might obey? Is it because of self-interest, fear, habit or something else? 2. What would it take to create change? Would persuasion be enough, if so, what kind? Or would change require something stronger? 3. What kind of non-violent tactics would really cause this pillar to withdraw their support for the government? Discuss with the group. Would x tactic really cause y "pillar of support" to withdraw their support from the

government and join the movement. For example, what actions could the civil servants take to eliminate their carrying out government functioning? Or how could the movement dispel fear so that more people joined the movement? Discuss which pillars may be stronger and which ones weaker. Explain that in a moment all the “pillars of support” will return to the room and begin holding up the mattress. The task of the non-violent activists (the ones still inside the room) is approach the appropriate “pillar of support” and try and verbally (without touching) “persuade” their pillar of support to come over to the side of the movement. The activists will do that by mentioning and explaining a non-violent tactic. If the “pillar of support” feels that that tactic or selection of tactics is sufficient to persuade them to join the movement then that “pillar of support” walks out from underneath the mattress and joins the movement. If you like you can ask each pillar to write the name of their “pillar of support” on a piece of paper.

4. Meanwhile, while the “pillars of support” group is outside the other facilitator explains to the non-violent activists that their task is to come up with at least three non-violent tactics that are collective, build power (increase the strength of the movement) and can be escalated. Each person or group needs to think about how these tactics might be sequenced? What combination of tactics might cause that “pillar of support” to be eroded or join the movement. For example, what actions could the civil servants take to eliminate their carrying out government functioning? Or how could the movement dispel fear so that more people joined the movement? Give them 3-5 minutes to work in small groups. Support them to think hard about what non-violent tactic or selection of tactics would work, what preconditions might be needed and how activists might help create these preconditions.

5. Ask the “pillars of support” remaining outside to come into the room and hold up the mattress. Recap the rules. Remind the group that only speaking is allowed to “pull” the “pillar of support” over to the movement’s side. Also remind the group that if the “pillar of support” feels the tactic is insufficient to create change they won’t move and the job of the activist group is to think of other tactics. Then in a big loud voice announce that the game will begin. Activists approach their pillar and a dialogue of sorts begins until the pillars are removed and the mattress finally falls to the ground.

6. Enjoy the moment. De-brief the activity by asking questions such as: How did it feel to see the government getting shakier? Do governments really depend on the cooperation/ compliance of these forces? Even dictatorships? What was the order in which groups non-cooperated (e.g. what pillar fell first?). was that order realistic? What tactics were used? Which groups might hang on until the end? Are there ways of intervening which reduce the level of support even of groups still loyal to the regime?

7. Encourage participants to give examples from past struggles, and supply examples yourself. An effective way to end the exercise is quickly to recite a list of dictatorships which have fallen to nonviolent noncooperation. A hand-out of this sort can be derived from Gene Sharp’s work, especially *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

Other notes

It is recommended activists have a thorough understanding of the consent theory of power before presenting this tool.

Where this tool comes from

Originally developed by George Lakey, Training for Change, USA, www.TrainingForChange.org, e-mail: peacelearn@igc.org. This version was modified by Rev. Daniel Buttry.

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Handout: A List of Successful Nonviolent Struggles

Nonviolent action has occurred in all parts of the world. It is a phenomenon that cuts across ethnic, cultural, religious, geographic, socioeconomic and other demographic lines. Nonviolent struggles have been waged on behalf of a myriad of causes and groups (see the [applications of nonviolent action](#) section of our site), and even for objectives that many people reject. It has been used to prevent, as well as to promote, change.

Some nonviolent struggles have been major successes, while others have failed, and still others have had mixed results. Some cases of the use of this technique in the last century are:

1. The labor and general strikes that paralyzed Russia in the 1905 Revolution
2. Chinese boycotts of Japanese products in 1908, 1915, and 1919
3. German noncooperation against the Kapp *Putsch* in 1920
4. German resistance against the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923
5. The Indian struggle for independence against British rule from the 1920s-1940s
6. The struggle among Pashtun Muslims in the British Northwest Frontier Province (now Pakistan) against British rule between 1930-1934.
7. Resistance to Nazi occupation and rule between 1940-1945 in various European countries, particularly in Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands.
8. Nonviolent action to save Jews from the Holocaust in Berlin, Bulgaria, Denmark, and elsewhere.
9. The ousting of the military dictatorships in El Salvador and Guatemala in the spring of 1944.
10. The U.S. civil rights movement against racial segregation, especially during the 1950s and 1960s.
11. Major aspects of the Hungarian revolution of 1956-57.
12. Noncooperation by French conscript soldiers in the French colony of Algeria, which, combined with popular demonstrations in France and defiance by the Debré-de Gaulle government, defeated the coup d'état in Algiers in April 1961 before a related coup in Paris could be launched.

13. The Czech and Slovak resistance against the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968-1969. This resistance held off full Soviet control for eight months with improvised nonviolent struggle and refusal of collaboration.

14. The struggles for increased freedom by dissidents in Communist-ruled countries in Eastern Europe, especially in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic States, between 1953-1990.

15. The Solidarity struggle in Poland, which began in 1980 with strikes to support the demand of a legal free trade union, and concluded in 1989 with the end of the Polish Communist regime.

16. The nonviolent struggles to end the Communist dictatorships in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and in East Germany, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1991.

17. The noncooperation and defiance that defeated the Soviet "hard-line" coup d'état in Moscow in 1991.

18. The nonviolent protests and mass resistance against the Apartheid policies in South Africa, especially between 1950 and 1990.

19. The nonviolent uprising that destroyed the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986.

20. The defiance, protests, and marches that brought down three Burmese governments in July and August of 1988. This struggle, however, succumbed to a new military coup in the end and resulted in mass slaughter.

21. The demonstrations and protests against government corruption and oppression by Chinese students and others in over three hundred cities (including in Tiananmen Square, Beijing) in 1989. However these protests finally ended following massive killings by the military.

22. The Albanian noncooperation campaign from 1990-1999 against repressive Serbian rule in Kosovo. However, when the de facto Kosovo government lacked a nonviolent strategy for gaining de jure independence, a guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army initiated violence. This was followed by extreme Serbian repression and massive slaughters by so-called "ethnic cleansing," which led to NATO bombing and intervention.

23. The movement to oust Serbia dictator Slobodan Milosevic, which began in November 1996 with Serbs conducting daily parades and protests in Belgrade and other cities. At that time, however, Serb democrats lacked a strategy to press on the struggle and failed to launch a campaign to bring down the Milosovic dictatorship. In early October 2000, the *Otpor* (Resistance) movement and other democrats rose up again against Milosevic in a carefully planned nonviolent struggle and the dictatorship collapsed.

24. The “People Power Two” campaign, which ousted Filipino President Estrada in early 2001.

These cases are a sample of nonviolent struggles in the last century. Many more cases have occurred. These cases are also not intended to necessarily represent of the full variety of locations, circumstances, or objectives sought by groups in nonviolent struggles. However, they do illustrate that this is a technique of action used in many circumstances by many different people for varying objectives.

Source:

<http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations.php3orgid=88&typeID=6&action=printContentItem&itemID=191>. Accessed 09.06.2004