

Leadership Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement

With Roxanne Manning

My life is spent traveling between different lands.

There is the land of my NVC family. This land is full of people who have abundant hope, who believe change is possible. Some focus on individual change – making their lives and the lives of people in their families and communities better - while others focus on trying to create change in the systems around them. They all believe that change is possible. There is also the land of my county job – a land of disenfranchised men and women, many of them homeless, mentally ill, addicted to drugs, with few family and friends. Many of the people in this land have little hope that things could be better. When they meet with me, I represent a hope in which they often can't quite bring themselves to believe.

At times, I struggle as I navigate, moving from the Land of Abundant Hope to the Land of No Hope. When I'm in the Land of Abundant Hope, a part of me starts to believe it. From that perspective, I look at the other land and think of its inhabitants – if only they had hope, if only they knew what was possible, they would have power, they would be able to get exactly what they need. When I walk through the Land of No Hope, I look at how hard these men and women have tried, at all they've faced in their lives, and I begin to think so much is unpredictable and uncontrollable. So many people just don't care about the disenfranchised and the struggling. Changing our lives and the systems in which we live is a Sisyphean task. As I move between the lands, I see people stuck on a treadmill, either moving up to the Land of Abundant Hope, or falling off and landing in the Land of No Hope.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. Day draws near, I wonder how the examples of the civil right movement can help me to make sense of these lands? What lessons can we take from the monumental change people affected and how can we apply those lessons to our current times and situation? What **framing** can we bring to the experiences of those living with abundant hope or no hope that will keep us moving forward, creating change for the individual and in the systems in which we find ourselves?

The first lesson I learned from the Civil Rights Movement is that leaders come from everywhere, in every form. I'm guessing that each of you reading this article knows of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a powerful, charismatic leader of the Civil Rights Movement, a great thinker, and a man with incredible courage and conviction who changed the lives of countless African-Americans and all Americans. But, he did not do this alone. Many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, equally essential to the success of this work, are often unrecognized. Bayard Rustin **led from behind the scenes** as a **key organizer** of pivotal civil rights events such as the March on Washington. He was a **strategist** who taught Dr. King about Gandhi's work, and someone as willing to risk his life and liberty as Dr. King to ensure the movement's effectiveness. Similarly, Fannie Lou Hamer, one of 20 children born to sharecroppers, brutally beaten when arrested as a **civil rights activist**, worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, addressed the Democratic National Convention, and served as a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, working to get representation for African Americans to the national Democratic Party. Even though both of these leaders, and countless others, are much less known than Dr. King, anyone reading about their lives would acknowledge the powerful leadership they demonstrated in their actions. As I think about their dedication and commitment, I realize that one key lesson from the Civil Rights Movement is to **trust in what we as individuals have to contribute**, and to **give our talents in the form that is the best fit for us** – whether as the bright shiny sun, so easy to see, that was Dr. King, or the quietly glowing stars, hard at work and illuminating darkness, that were Rustin, Hamer and countless others.

In order to step into leadership, whatever form it takes, we need **resources**. Many of us spend a lot of time thinking about our lack of resources, finding ways that lack limits us. We think, "I'd like to end hunger, but I don't have the money to feed hundreds of people, or even to give one family food for a month. And I don't have the power to change the relationship between money and food in our current economic system." Or we think, "I'd like to help get out the vote, but I don't have a car, so I can't drive anyone to the polls. And I don't know how to help people trust their vote could really influence the systems that impact the issues that matter to them." We think of the resources we don't have, but we usually are thinking of what Miki and Inbal Kashtan (2014) called **external resources, aspects of life outside of ourselves** (such as money, time, health, connections) that we can use to meet needs. When we don't have these external resources, we give up, feel hopeless, powerless to impact our lives and the systems around us. When I think of some of the people I meet at my county job, people with so few external resources – no home, limited food, no warm clothing, poor health, lack of respect from others – if I focus only on external resources, once again I feel hopeless.

How could they possibly have any impact to change their lives, let alone on the world? Here again I find wisdom in lessons learned from the Civil Rights Movement.

Many leaders in the Civil Rights Movement who had a **powerful impact on those around them did not have access to many external resources**. As I mentioned earlier, Fannie Lou Hamer was born to sharecroppers. What she did have, that made it possible for her to lead as she did, was internal resources. **Internal resources are aspects of our inner experience** - qualities such as self-connection, knowledge, flexibility, compassion, the ability to develop belief systems different from those we have been taught, and resilience - that can help us to meet needs (Miki and Inbal Kashtan, 2014). With strong internal resources, civil rights leaders, even those without external resources, were able to confront the degradations and trials of the Civil Rights Movement with persistence, grace and dignity that inspired thousands to join them. When we think about stepping into leadership - changing our individual lives, the lives of our family, community or the larger systems around us - these internal resources can be more powerful than any external capital. I might not have any money of my own, but, if I have **self-connection** that **allows me to maintain my dignity even when I'm being attacked**, if I can **speak out** about my experiences in a way that **invites you to see my humanity**, and to see the **other person's humanity**, if I can **inspire** you to act, then my leveraging my internal resources **may encourage you to use your external resources** to create change.

This happened, over and over again, during the Civil Rights movement, as poor, young, students sitting at lunch counters invited those around them to see past the powerful social narrative of the time and see the students' dignity. Those touched by the students' actions went on to stand up for civil rights, to join with the students and workers and so many others. When people used their internal resource to speak eloquently of their stories and of the lynchings and beatings that were endemic at the time, those hearing their voices, those with privilege, were **moved to join and support**. The Civil Rights movement succeeded on the strength of people with abundant internal resources, including **clarity about purpose**, the ability to **think creatively** about how to **inspire** and **empower** others, the ability to see another's pain and stand in **solidarity** with them, and **perseverance** and **resilience** in the face of overwhelming opposition from those with more external resources. The Civil Rights movement showed us the power that those with internal resources can wield, even in a world that values external resources.

As I move between the worlds I inhabit, I take these lessons to heart. When I'm in the NVC world of abundant hope, I think of how **NVC strengthens my internal resources**. And I take that strength with me when I go to my county world of no-hope. I bring those NVC skills and all my internal resources, and I think of how I can strengthen the internal resources of those around me, who might not even have a vision of what's possible. I might not be able to give the people I meet money, shelter or clothing. But, each time I **treat a person with dignity**, each time I **listen** to someone's story, letting them know they have **value**, I'm helping to create an **internal shift**, one that might make it possible for them to trust that they can speak and be **heard, ask** and **receive**. From these actions, creating a world of people with greater and greater access to internal resources, I have hope that change can come.

