

10 Things Your Org Can Do Right Now To Give the Progressive Movement a Chance to Win

Do something. Quit complaining. Suppress your cynicism. And cancel half your meetings.

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Progressive leaders are stressed, often beleaguered, besieged by requests for their time and focus. Non-profit leaders spend most of their time either raising money or worrying about money. Union leaders still have lots of money (though much less than before) but they face an institutionalized hostile environment, dwindling memberships and a relationship with most elected officials in which they are routinely taken for granted, often in the most cavalier manner.

Elected officials spend 40% of their time raising money and give nothing back to the organizations that got them elected. Stressed, themselves, by a cynicism born of the power of money in politics, they have little time to think, nurture their progressive instincts or read.

In broader terms, progressives have been losing or playing defense for so long that we call scrappy fight-back campaigns “victories.” (For example, Ohio’s governor takes away collective bargaining, even for police and firefighters, the union and their allies fight back and win, and we call it a progressive victory—no matter that the right-wing has taken millions of dollars out of play for the next campaign, in much the same way that, in boxing, body punches set the victim up for the eventual head shots.)

We know a lot about what needs to be done in the long term:

- a) Change campaign finance.
- b) Build a formidable progressive infrastructure that is large, well-funded, and connected.
- c) Engage and develop new and under-developed constituencies such as working women, Latinos, African Americans, and young people.
- d) Develop large numbers of new leaders.
- e) Use our deeper and wider power base to do big things, such as stop climate change, reverse our gross income inequality and make quality, affordable education available to everybody.

But what can you do now, right now, that would make a huge difference in expanding your effectiveness as a leader and strengthen your organization and the progressive movement?

There's no need to wait.

No one is going to recruit or anoint you to do these things. You're guaranteed to make mistakes. But get in the spirit of the Joseph Heller novel, *Do Something*, and, well, do something. Quit complaining. Suppress your cynicism, that most diabolical progressive affliction that keeps you from bringing your whole self to your work and life.

Below are 10 things you can do in the next month that will start a shift in your thinking, your daily experience on the job, the people with whom you spend your time, and what you do. Informing these suggestions are my 40 years of experience in developing over 5,000 leaders, direct experience in dozens of progressive organizations, and advancing age, which gives me the freedom to say what I really think.

1) Take time off. Your time is simultaneously precious and overrated. It is precious in that it is one way you have to express what you value, what you care about (the only other way being how and where we spend our money). So every time you attend a bullshit meeting or conference you have devalued yourself.

I have had dozens of friends who have had heart attacks, cancer, or other serious diseases. All of them changed the way they worked when they were able to work again. And almost to a person, they told me that they have experienced zero loss in productivity upon their return to a more human and humane way of working.

Don't wait for your body to force you to change.

Your time, however, is also overrated when you think you have to be "on" or "there" all the time. If you have even done a halfway decent job of delegating, you have time to take off. Even if you have no one to whom to delegate, you still have time to take time off.

Why? Because you can't be really on if you are never off. Progressive work demands that you have super-sharp focus, one that is constant and sequential, always knowing the purpose of every encounter, driving toward a future that you (and your colleagues) have imagined. You simply can't sustain that focus without ample time off, time to refresh, to renew, to enjoy yourself, to learn, to do something other than work.

Progressives have a tendency toward martyrdom. We associate productivity, and sometimes even leadership, with long hours and long faces, showing the seriousness we have for the cause. But who really cares how long you work? No one. Building a powerful organization matters. Winning matters. Developing other leaders matters. How many hours you work does not matter. Period.

And for the plugged-in generation? Turn the goddamn smart phone off. You will survive. Your friends and colleagues will survive without the fix. A local union leader told me the story of how she finally took a vacation. She went to a Mexican beach resort. Her first day on the beach, she was just beginning a novel when her phone rang. A problem had come up in the union that needed her attention, or so some people thought. She ended up working on that urgent problem every day of her “vacation.” As she told me later, “I shouldn’t have taken my phone on vacation. I ruined it, a vacation I really needed.”

The urgent problem really hadn’t been that urgent. Others could have dealt with it. And she was a much worse leader as a result of not insisting that she be off. She and the organization paid the price for her being mentally tired and physically enervated.

2) Cancel half your meetings. There can be little doubt that meetings were designed by the devil to keep us from getting anything done. Most of them are useless. Most of them enervate instead of energize. Almost all of them are too long, and lack specificity as to their real purpose.

Follow these few rules and eliminating half of your meetings will be easy:

a) Don’t go to a meeting unless the purpose of the meeting is stated in a short simple sentence. (Caveat: “Sharing information” is NEVER a good reason for a meeting.)

b) Don’t go to meetings in which you have no role; only attend meetings where your role is essential.

c) All meetings should lead to action. Therefore, be very wary of “regular” meetings that exist primarily because of their spot on the calendar. If a regular meeting has no action to approve, cancel the meeting. Everyone but the professional meeting-attenders will be happy.

If you are the one planning and executing a meeting, follow these rules, all under the umbrella of the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you:”

a) Clearly state and communicate the purpose of the meeting.

b) No meeting should be more than one and a quarter hours in length (training excepted).

c) Most of the work should be done ahead of time, not in the meeting.

d) The meeting should move toward action.

e) The meeting speaks to both the head and the heart. Remember—there are human beings working here! Design the meeting to create a positive emotional experience.

f) Tension is a necessary ingredient of change, is part of every good meeting, and almost always is what people remember.

g) Focus on the engagement of the people whose action is critical for success and related to the meeting's objective, not just some pseudo-engaged, egalitarian "participation" of everyone.

h) Leave out people who don't prepare for the meeting. We will survive without their spontaneous insights.

3) Fire somebody. People who are not making a superior contribution to the organization are corrupting the organization's culture. The performance standard of an organization, while most likely set by its leaders, is undermined by its weakest performers. Keeping C performers around will slowly turn your B performers into Cs ("why work any harder? Jack, over there, just does the minimum and he's still around") and will drive off your A performers. "As" have options. They only want to be in organizations with high standards that allow them to perform at a high level.

Progressives tend to have a hard time firing people. It seems cruel and insensitive. After all, as I've heard a hundred times, "We are family here." No. You aren't family (and you may be forgetting, as well, that half of all families break up).

And just because someone is a good person doesn't mean he or she is a good fit in the organization. They and we would be better off if they weren't here.

4) Hire somebody. Most of us have witnessed the effect of, as our organization's talent management expert, Dr. Michael McGrath says, "getting the right person, in the right job, at the right time." It is almost magic. The right person can make other people better. She brings fresh eyes and new energy, seeing things we don't presently see, questioning the ways things are done, imagining possibilities that the organizationally habituated can't imagine. She is like yeast.

Think of the difference it made when Eisenhower was catapulted to power over hundreds of other generals to take the reins of World War II. Or the difference in a go-nowhere Washington Redskins football team until RGIII arrived (my apologies for another sports example). Or the difference it made when a 28-year-old Dr. Martin Luther King was picked to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association.

5) Make learning the heart of the matter. It is arrogant to assume that the organizational structure and culture we either build or inherited is just what we need now. External conditions change (look no further than the Citizen's United decision). Competition changes. Generational sensitivities change. Technology changes.

Therefore the only way to be doing what we need to be doing, the only way to be true to our mission, is to have mechanisms for constant learning and change. We would have a veritable revolution if progressive would honestly evaluate – everything. For the deepest learning occurs in systematic reflection after a common experience. John Dewey puts it this way: Such happiness as life is capable of comes from the full participation of all our powers in the endeavor to wrest from each changing situation or experience its own full and unique meaning.

Further, learning is for everyone. How much more attractive would your organization be if people knew it as the place where learning occurs, everywhere, and where everyone learns and contributes what they've learned? One never knows the source of great insights. They may come from the CEO, but they may also come from the intern behind the counter in the mail room. Change consultant Alan Greggerman named it in the title to his book, *Surrounded by Geniuses*.

Our organization's faculty conducted a Discovery Visit to an organization, a visit characterized by individual conversations with every person on the staff. Our job was to listen carefully, to try to understand what was really going on inside the organization, and to report what we heard to the officers. We developed this practice out of our experience and deep belief that everyone holds a piece of the truth, and certainly no one or two of us hold all of it.

We believe that, as Judge Learned Hand said, "Truth is most likely to occur from a multitude of tongues."

We had finished the conversations and were in the next stage of our work, figuring out what all those conversations meant. Then I got an email from one of the administrative assistants we had talked to. She said she had other observations she thought we needed to hear. What followed was one of the most observant insights we had heard about the organization for a long time. She just needed a place to put what she knew.

Except for the few people who act like the living dead, the rest of us want to learn. It is essential to who we are as people. When we are learning, we are engaged; when we stop learning, we become back-of-the-room critics and cynics.

A learning culture requires four things:

- a) Relationships of trust, at a minimum knowing each other's story.
- b) An embedded learning practice of planning-action-evaluation
- c) A recognition/reward system that prizes directness, openness, and collective and individual success.
- d) A leadership collective that puts learning at the center (e.g. "O.K., we fucked up on that campaign. Now let's look at it and understand why.")

6) Change your organization. Grow it. Merge it. Kill it. All good leaders are in the organizational change business. That means that a considerable part of the job for every leader is to move the people and other resources of the organization toward what they need to become. "What is" is always obsolete.

And let's be clear. The present constellation of progressive organizations is like a pea-shooter against the organizational juggernaut of the venal .01%. It's our issue/advocacy organizations, with tiny budgets, against the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable and the Koch brothers, for whom a \$100 million political investment is chump change. And we fool ourselves that we can still win because we are "better coordinated," or "more aligned."

The only reason we haven't become permanent footstools is because of the political gifts of the crazy right-wing, e.g. Romney's "47%," "fetal masturbation," "self-deportation," the attacks on Planned Parenthood, and the gifts that keep on giving, like Michele Bachmann, Sarah Palin, Senator Ted Cruz, and Governor Rick Perry.

So progressive leaders need to make a fundamental strategic decision—do I grow the organization, do I merge it, or do I kill it?

The one option you should eliminate is the one that is most often in play: Using the organization as your platform. If when you leave your leadership position the organization is not significantly more powerful, you failed as a leader. You took a paycheck, worked long hours, and wasted a lot of time. You played the participation game instead of the "winning" game.

Size matters. A really good heavyweight fighter is going to win almost all of the time against a really good featherweight fighter. And our side doesn't have enough heavyweight fighters. Progressives need a whole series of big, powerful, fearsome and feared organizations. The inverse is also true. We don't need a whole bunch of featherweight organizations, scrambling for money and publicity. I can think of a handful right now that are hanging on by a thread, whose usefulness has been waning for years, and which would make perfect sense to be shut down. Do a mercy killing, letting the best and the brightest land somewhere where their talents would add value, and letting the few dollars go somewhere else.

Look at the Fortune 500. Businesses in the top 50 one year may not even be around 10 years later. Ideals have to endure. But specific organizations do not.

Like a love affair, just because an organization started doesn't mean it has a claim on continued existence.

The questions to ask are these:

a) Does the organization make a superior contribution?

b) If we didn't have this organization, would we start it?

c) Is there a merger that makes sense? (Word of caution: most mergers don't work and all require some sophisticated outside help and more time to successfully pull it off than you think)

Implied in these assertions is a willingness to do honest assessments, with everything on the table. We can never really get to "what should be" or "what could be" if we don't first look at "what is." Inertia is a tremendously powerful force. We gravitate toward the familiar, even when the familiar is part of the problem. Look at people's behavior at a two-day conference. The majority of the people will sit in the same place they sat the first day.

When I was living in New York, my mother, father, and sister came for a visit, their first time to the Big Apple from a small East Texas town. A current student at the University of Texas, my sister was interested in the NIT basketball tournament being played at Madison Square Garden, particularly since UT was in the quarter-finals.

We went to the game, stopping near the Garden to eat hotdogs at a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Texas won the game. I had to work the next day, but my sister and parents decided they

wanted to go to the next game. They went. I asked them about the game (UT won again), and then asked them where they ate. They said they ate at the little hot dog place near the Garden! They went to the game a third day. I don't remember who won the game, but I remember them saying that they ate at the same hole-in-the-wall hot dog place—and this in a town of 50,000 restaurants!

Inertia is the enemy. Innovation is the cure. We are either creating new power and capacity, or we are falling behind.

7) Think.Over the past several decades I have had the opportunity to work with leaders from a number of different kinds of organizations—unions, churches, non-profits, advocacy organizations, businesses, community organizations, etc. Once we had worked together enough to establish some candor, I asked this question over and over: “How much time do you spend doing systematic thinking in a normal week?” The answer is usually zero, with a few saying up to an hour! Almost always someone will add, “But I think when I'm driving!”

The more responsibility one has in an organization, the more quality time that leader needs for thinking. For how leaders think has a disproportionate impact on the organization. Hopefully, thinking is democratically spread through an organization, but it is the principle job of top leaders. It can't be delegated away, because top leaders have a perspective that others don't have. They are responsible for the whole. Therefore, they have to think for the whole.

A weekly commitment to an isolated, electronic-free setting and a specified amount of time are basic requisites. This is a meeting with yourself—to move you out of the activity-driven present tense, to make sense of the past, and to imagine and plot toward a future. This is a meeting for muddling, letting things stew, considering and sharpening alternatives, trying on, and testing.

Progressive leaders have an additional problem with creating and maintaining a time and place for systematic thinking. They live in a world where keeping and appearing busy has a high value, where constant activity proves you are committed. Progressives tend to value martyrdom over performance, even though they would deny it. After a while, fear creeps in, i.e. “what if I miss something?” Leaders based in Washington, D.C., have an exponential version of this problem. There are multiple events every night that might be good to go to.

8) Avoid and forget coalitions.Build Strategic Partnerships. A coalition is a lazy organizer's way of organizing. We just round up all the people who agree with us and trot them out in front of the Capitol. Coalitions are about seeming unity, long letterheads, and high-energy fecklessness. In the

corridors of power, they are ignored. One image we might keep in mind while we are listening to one predictable speech after another at that coalition-sponsored rally is that K Street lobbyists, every day, are in every single conference room where anything of substance is being decided.

In contrast, a Strategic Partnership is a carefully cultivated long-term relationship among organizations based on a deep understanding of each partner's organization and an empathic relationship between and among the various leaders. It requires patience, understanding, empathy, and, in its mature stages, clearly defined mutual interests. If a coalition organizer is like an action junkie, a Strategic Partnership organizer is like a Major Gifts Director at a large university. Bigger prizes take a much longer time and constant attention and don't always pan out.

Most progressive organizations are not even structured in a way to cultivate and sustain Strategic Partnerships. They have no dedicated staff to build the early relationships, to cut through the layers of gatekeepers, to do the organizational research. Instead, the most familiar practice is for the President of the organization to maintain relationships with other Presidents. They are all friendly, but the deeper organization-to-organization strategic focus is a rare product of that friendliness.

9) Practice. Do it with a coach. If you want to be good, practice. Then practice some more. Then some more.

Whether it is the ability to give speeches to various sizes and types of audiences, or the ability to be effective in meetings, or coach, or train, or supervise, or be on TV, or think strategically, or build complicated relationships with other people of power, it requires practice. No one gets good without practice. I am aghast at how little progressive leaders practice, and equally aghast at how few leaders are getting the coaching they need to do the right kind of work.

I learned many valuable lessons when I was with the Saul David Alinsky Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the largest network of community organizations in the U.S. Three of them had to do with individual proficiency practice:

a) Have 8 individual meetings a day. As Malcolm Gladwell has argued, you have to do something 10,000 times to be really good at it. Quality requires quantity. Even assuming we didn't hit the 8/day goal every day, IAF organizers were meeting and attempting to build relationships with around 1500 new people per year, enough to begin to get good at it.

b) Think, evaluate, and write notes after each of those meetings to maximize the learning from each.

c) Make it personal—"How did I do? What could I have done differently, better?"

d) Practice with a coach. Professional athletes, actors, and CEO's of large companies all have coaches. Some of them have multiple coaches. Why? Because they want to practice the right thing, the right way to elicit desired reactions. It is almost impossible to see ourselves as others see us. We can be churning, working, laboring, doing our best, but it takes someone else to tell us what we are really doing and to show us how to do it differently.

I learned that the only way to know how developing organizers were really doing was to go with them as they had their individual meetings. One young organizer, eager, but full of himself, was waxing to me about how much he had had in common with the people with whom he was meeting. Sure enough, in his individual meetings in which I sat as an observer, he was looking for common ground, which was the opposite of what he was supposed to be doing. He was supposed to be looking for what was uniquely particular to each person, not rounding it off to what they shared in common. Without my observation and coaching, he would have continued to get better, but at the wrong thing.

Recently deceased Harvard Professor Richard Hackman, the best thinker and writer in the country on "senior leadership teams," conducted voluminous studies on what makes successful teams. Not surprisingly, having a coach for the team was vital, someone whose job it was to give feedback and coaching to team members on their behavior with other team members. Even with smart, energetic, committed team members, good team behavior is not guaranteed. It is a learned behavior.

10) Get help.For those who say, "Well, I didn't get any help and I made it," I say, "I'm sorry, but you would have developed a lot faster had you had the right kind of help, and you might not be operating today with as many blind spots, and you might not be so rigid."

Our organization, for example, has concluded that leaders need—and important progressive leaders deserve—three distinct but interconnected kinds of coaching. We call it 3C Coaching.

3C Coaching is a rich blend of individual coaching, performance coaching, and organizational coaching. Synthesized from the hundreds of years of collective experience of our faculty, this approach is based on several assumptions:

a) Most leaders, often for a lot of good reasons, hold themselves back. They play under their weight class because it is more comfortable there. And in many cases, they are not even aware of how much they are limiting what they could accomplish. Therefore they benefit from Individual Coaching, the first

“C.” This work involves, often over several months or even years, helping leaders understand the ways they are holding themselves back, and to support them as they venture forth toward bolder leadership.

b) Most leaders spend little time crafting their public personas and, as a result, fail to create maximum impact in all their encounters. Therefore, they benefit tremendously from Performance Coaching, the second “C.” Here, the necessary work is to get help from trained actors who pay attention to the body and voice aspects of public leadership. Usually, leaders will experience almost instant improvement. Sustained practice under watchful eyes can extend the range of compelling public performance to all settings—speeches, TV appearances, press conferences, negotiations, internal meetings, etc.

c) The cultures of most organizations stifle creativity, hamper change, and diminish the people in them. Therefore, they usually require Organizational Coaching, the third “C.” We have identified five fundamental human needs that, if met inside of organizations, create the conditions for people to thrive. In addition, we have identified ten critical elements of successful organizations. We work with top leadership teams to ingrain those elements into their organization in a way that is appropriate and specific to their structure, mission, and competitive environment.

Start Now

You can get started now on any of the above ideas. Start. Put some things in motion, evaluate, change/tweak, and try it again. The constant act of leadership is hard work, requiring both will and skill. Dig in and discover or unleash the sources of your will. Get serious about developing the skills you need.

If you do so, our progressive organizations will be bigger and badder and our movement will be stronger as your own leadership becomes bolder and more thoughtful, generous, strategic, practiced, and full.

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