




Tornado Warning

Four Roles in Social Change

Here's a tool to learn about the four roles of social change activists: Citizens, Change Agents, Rebels, and Reformers. It's goal is to build appreciation of the different roles, gaining empathy for all roles and different approaches to change.

Running the Exercise

 I'm going to read a scenario. While you're hearing this scenario, think about the kind of response you'd make. Where are you immediately drawn in this situation?

The Scenario • In a Midwestern city in the US, a major tornado hits and knocks down a big manufactured home park. Almost forty people are still unaccounted for, and might be trapped in the rubble. The city's response is terribly inadequate – both in terms of preparation for a disaster like this, and in terms of execution of its flawed plan. State and federal offices have the resources to respond, but are not adequately mobilized. The bungled relief effort highlights a number of broader issues about how the government at all levels responds, especially to working poor Midwesterners.

How do you change this dreadful situation? Take a quick moment to think what you would do if you lived in that city.

Now, I'm going to read four possible actions, and point to places in the room. If you are immediately drawn to this particular action, move over to that spot. First listen to them all, then think about which reaction you are most likely to take.

Possible actions:

1. People could be dying under the rubble and need help immediately. We should go to the park right now and try to help the rescue efforts. Even if we can't help them, there are probably children who need care and could use our help.
2. We need to get on city hall's case right away, and see what is keeping the authorities from doing their jobs. We know they could get the state and the feds in here right away. There are systems in the city and we need to make sure everyone has tried all the options.
3. We need to get people together to plan an action about all the needs that aren't getting met. What can the churches do? What can the Rotarians and the Chamber of Commerce do? We should bring together the people who are suffering and allies together to put pressure on government to change the situation.
4. We can't let the government abuse people like this! Where's the governor and mayor? We need to raise our voices so they and the public can hear our outrage! Let's go camp on the state capitol grounds until he asks for a disaster declaration and gets the disaster relief funds flowing. We'll dramatize the loss of homes by setting up tents right where he has to look at them every day!



Assign each of the four roles to a corner in the room. Have people move there based on their immediate response to *this* situation. It may not always be an exact match, but tell people to pick which role best describes their impulse. If there are not enough people to fill a role, ask if a few people at least have an inkling in that direction, and could move over to that corner.



Why are you in this spot? What do you think about the others? How is this particular role critical in making social change happen?



After letting people discuss for a while, let them share in the large group. Then write up the four roles, sharing the names of the roles to each of them: 1. Citizens, 2. Reformers, 3. Change Agents, and 4. Rebels.



From your position, what annoys you or concerns you when working with someone from one of the other positions? What would you say to the other roles about working with you?



Stay expansive, light and energetic.

After discussing the questions in small groups and reporting back after each discussion, bring everyone back together. Then pass out the handout “Four Roles Relating to Change” and talk about it in the large group. Include questions like: what is the value of the different roles?

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Four roles of social change from Bill Moyer’s Doing Democracy, part of Movement Action Plan*