

# Movement Pivots: Five Steps to Collective Impact & Transformative Social Change



MOVEMENT  
STRATEGY  
CENTER

*What We're Learning Paper No. 1*  
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## **About Movement Pivots**

*Movement Pivots* is the first in a series of MSC mini publications called *What We're Learning*. Through these papers – each produced in conjunction with a specific movement gathering or action – MSC seeks to name and explore questions and challenges that we are hearing and observing throughout the social justice world. As the title implies, these papers represent “what we're learning,” offering our words and thoughts to on-going dialogue among partners, allies, and friends we have not yet met.

The core contributors to the development of the movement pivots wording and concepts were MSC Senior Fellows Jidan Terry-Koon, Levana Saxon, Kristen Zimmerman, and Mimi Ho, drawing on the influence and input of others including Norma Wong and Move to End Violence. MSC Senior Fellow Julie Quiroz produced *Movement Pivots* based on that work, with design by Lily Wong.

## **About Movement Strategy Center**

MSC is dedicated to transformative movement building: helping individuals, organizations, and alliances build their capacity to be strategic, collaborative, and sustainable. MSC is a national intermediary that works with over 300 partner grassroots organizations, alliances, and networks that operate at local, regional, and national levels. MSC works across sectors and within sectors. MSC supports local alliances that bring people in one place together across issues and constituencies, and supports national alliances that unite groups working on common issues.

# Introduction: Setting Great Change Into Motion<sup>1</sup>

When a wave of change sweeps over society — where does it start and what determines its direction and outcome? As Gandhi began his march to the sea or Rosa Parks made her stand on the bus, what were all the threads — in their lives and others' — that led to that moment? What set these great changes in motion?

While the precise beginnings may never be known, the paths and the practices of these movements were indisputably transformative. Guided by visions that were bold and audacious, these movements were informed by the reality of the time, yet radically departed from it. Their goals were often dismissed as unrealistic, delusional, or — as charged in the case of slavery, abolition, or apartheid — against the very laws of nature. The distance they were attempting to travel was vast.

Trying to change even one system is a perilous and elusive task; transforming the very fabric and DNA of the whole society can seem like an act of magic. Somehow these movements found ways to shift the minds, hearts, and spirit of individual people and spur a metamorphosis in the “collective body.” They made it possible for everyday people to re-imagine and re-invent their world, to take risks they previously thought impossible, and ultimately to be different. They created energy and momentum that shifted everything the movement touched — individuals, families, communities, organizations, and institutions in their own society and other societies over many, many generations. They created paths for individual and collective transformation — no small feat.

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction and other text in this booklet are drawn from MSC's forthcoming publication (by Kristen Zimmerman), exploring movement organizations' use of collective transformative practices.

# Movement Pivots: Where Are We Stuck? How Can We Move Forward?

Pretty much everyone agrees: The changes we need are still bigger than the movements we've built. The challenges we face — ecological disaster, economic inequity, structural racism, to name a few — demand a quality and quantity of response that right now we only glimpse signs of, every now and then.

The present moment is — must be — about social justice being bolder, more alive and more impactful. In order to get in and truly change the game, collectively we need to have the courage to embrace a bold, inspiring vision and align that vision with sharp strategy and discipline. We need to take on the bigger fights, reshape the narrative and lift up our values, inspire and assume support from the majority, collaborate with each other with deep commitment, and bring spirit and culture to both lead and sustain.

**How do we do this?** Using our own experience (both accomplishments and failures), listening to the stories told among our partners and allies, and observing the broader patterns in social movement work today, MSC has sought:

- To name some of the key challenges which exist in US social movement building today,
- To imagine how our work would look and feel if we overcame those challenges, and
- To describe key qualities of movement building that allow us to make the shift from old challenges to new ways of being.

MSC has come to call these five shifts The Movement Pivots. The table on the next page provides a snapshot of the Movement Pivots. We hope that our presentation of these movement pivots contributes to the exciting and soul-searching dialogue happening across so many movements.

## Five Movement Pivots

<b>Movement Challenges: Where We're Stuck</b>	<b>Movement Strengths: Where We Can Go</b>	<b>Effective Movement Building: How We Can Get There</b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Isolation</b></p> <p>Narrow focus; issue fragmentation and geographic isolation.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interdependence</b></p> <p>Acting as one organism; unified, whole.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Hold Broad Awareness</b></p> <p>Broad awareness of movement eco-system, relationships, and roles.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Defensive Stance</b></p> <p>Reactive and fighting for reform around the edges.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Offensive Stance</b></p> <p>Shifting the parameters of debate, opening new possibilities, radically transforming ourselves and society.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lead with Bold Vision and Purpose</b></p> <p>Pro-active; envision beyond what is politically possible; lead with what we want.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Marginalization</b></p> <p>Those most impacted by systems of oppression are marginalized in the movement.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Stepping into Power</b></p> <p>Create a new center where we are, grounded in our strengths and most impacted communities.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ground in People, Community, and History</b></p> <p>Centralize the leadership and strategies of people of color and other frontline groups; shift power and funding.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Competition</b></p> <p>Lack of alignment; competition; false dichotomies.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strategic Direction</b></p> <p>Moving with diverse strategies and functions — all in one direction; irresistible, powerful, bigger than the sum of its parts.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Align and Move</b></p> <p>Movement level strategy and coordination; acting from a “We”; transcending binaries and finding a third way.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Control</b></p> <p>Pressure to “know” and “succeed” constrain us from thinking creatively and taking risks.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Creativity</b></p> <p>Unexpected solutions that work for the highest good of all; tapping into the great unknowable creative impulse for freshness, beauty, resonance.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Trust and Innovate</b></p> <p>Trying on new ideas and approaches; fiercely respecting and paying attention to each other's humanity with curiosity and trust; taking risks, making and learning from mistakes.</p>

# How Can We Make These Pivots?

## Five Steps to Collective Impact & Transformative Social Change

Observing what is working in social justice today, MSC sees five capacities that movement builders can develop to pivot from movement challenges to movement strengths.

### **One: Hold Broad Awareness**

A key aspect of movement building is developing a keen awareness of interdependence, the landscape, and movement eco-system that we inhabit. As movement builders, our job is to know our terrain — the bigger context we are working in — in order to understand our unique role, given our particular mission and gifts.

Groups can overcome challenges of issue and geographic isolation by taking time to talk with likely or unlikely allies and map out the landscapes they could be working in and how other issues intersect with theirs.

### **Two: Lead with Bold Vision and Purpose**

A bold and compelling vision and purpose gives a movement a horizon to aim for and energizes people to cohere and act over the long haul. As movement builders we need to reach beyond what we think is politically feasible or culturally possible at the moment so that we can take a bold, fierce stand to address root causes in inequity, violence, and ecological destruction. While we need to be grounded and pragmatic in our short-term strategy, we also need to be audacious in our long-term vision and goals.

Ultimately we aim to re-imagine and reinvent our world. As movement builders we need to invest as much or more energy in leading and creating new alternatives as we invest in resistance or reform. By focusing our attention towards governance and alternative systems, we pro-actively define and manifest the world we want.

### **Three: Ground in People, Communities, and Histories**

Movements are about moving people — individuals, groups, communities, and societies — to action. While we may sometimes think of our work as connecting organizations, the lifeblood of a movement is the relationships and human connections we build with each other. When a movement helps people feel deeply connected to themselves, to each other, to a vision, and to their collective power, it is a strong movement that can be sustained over time for the long haul.

Alliances, networks, and movements are made of people: the connection, trust, quality of relationship, and chemistry are what create the “magic” for strategy to develop, hard work to be sustained, and resilience to transform conflict into opportunity.

The leadership of frontline communities is vital. Part of strengthening our internal connections lies in challenging and disrupting the separation and racism, sexism, classism, and all the other systems of oppression at work within our movements. Without the leadership and perspective of those who have been directly impacted by a problem, we are deeply limited in our ability to make change, particularly transformative change. Frontline communities lift up the root causes of problems, the true consequences of society’s structures and policies, as well as the solutions that will benefit us all.

As we hold the leadership of frontline communities, we need to do so without being dogmatic, and without excluding the whole. Rather than feeling and acting small and excluded, frontline communities need to take leadership in bringing ALL of society forward.

### **Four: Align and Move**

Just as water moves around rocks and moves downhill, we need to find strategies that build on strengths and momentum. In social justice we tend to believe that everything must be a struggle. Of course movement building is hard work, but moving with the flow is better than constantly pushing upstream.

The essence of movement strategy is to build power and achieve wins through aligning around shared purpose and moving together. We need to leverage each stage of work to set us up for the next phase. Movement building is not about

adopting a singular “right” social change method; it is about aligning various methods and politics towards common goals.

Social change movements need a model of coordination and alignment that centralizes the work of base-building organizations while building the power and vision to influence decisions on a national level. MSC believes that strategic alliances, networks, and initiatives are key vehicles to support movement building. Local to national, or “trans-local” strategic alliances (or networks and initiatives) enable local and regional organizations to build relationships between peer organizations while contributing to national impact.

Alignment and moving together require individual organizations to operate in a “We” frame of mind — to resist, unlearn, and chart a course other than competition. We need a well-understood division of labor in which we play to our strengths and find our best roles in the broader strategy.

This alignment includes the ability to hold dynamic tensions and transcend “either/or” thinking, which leads to false choices and false enemies, missed opportunities to find allies, and limited possibilities. While pushing ourselves to have the broadest perspective, we need to find breakthrough solutions and bridge perspectives that ultimately build more aligned strategies and create roles and places for more and more people.

## **Five: Trust and Innovate**

For all kinds of reasons — from funding to internalized oppression — many people and organizations in social justice feel tremendous pressure to “know” and “succeed.” This pressure constrains us from thinking creatively and taking risks. In fact, movement building works best in a creative environment, with unexpected solutions emerging that work for the highest good of all. It is movement building that taps into a creative impulse for freshness, beauty, and resonance.

Movement building means trying on new ideas and approaches, fiercely respecting and paying attention to each other's humanity with curiosity and trust. It means taking risks and making and learning from our mistakes.