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Grassroots Mojo: Bridging Yesterday with Today

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by Fred Tutman



The recent 50th Anniversary commemoration of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights brings to mind the long history of grassroots organizing, and the role the local Selma freedom movement played to help raise the civil rights conversation to national prominence.

In making the connection from Selma to today, we need to remember that there is a power, an inspirational wallop, that flows from small grassroots movements, like those that served as the foundation of the civil rights movement and today's environmental justice movement. The civil rights movements not only achieved their own local goals but served to pursue larger ones as well.

The grassroots have a powerful "mojo" with a deeply inspirational history of achievement. Grassroots causes have a track record of success that channel the raw energy needed to change the world in order to make it more just. Grassroots causes are also inherently democratic,

compassionate, equitable, empowering, and diverse! The fact that such movements generally lack money is unimportant, as their lack of cash is more than made up for with their zeal, ingenuity, and passion. Grassroots causes can produce charismatic and highly effective leadership. My own grassroots heroes include people like Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus Christ. Nobody paid them lots of money to be change agents.



A true grassroots movement generally draws its strength and vision from rank and file participants, while empowering the people and communities from which that same power and initiative flows. These mostly unpaid and localized grassroots groups often have intensely active and engaged members who control the priorities of their movement.

So while grassroots groups build coalitions and campaigns around mutual self-interest and shared moral commitment, top down ones often do so around issues that can rally more people and more money. And why not? These groups surely have more expenses and compete with other similar groups on national and international stages for both members and resources. But the key is that while both forms of advocacy can do vital and worthwhile work, they rarely do exactly the same work, nor should we always expect them to! Recognizing distinctions between top down organizations and grassroots movements is vital when understanding how true community-based advocacy works, and how such work occasionally clashes with well-meaning institutionalized environmentalism.

Despite these differences, if there is one thing of which I am certain, large top down movements need grassroots partners as well as a deeper appreciation of the rich potential of grassroots work and environmental justice.



I have heard it argued that these distinctions are unimportant because, regardless of the business model, grassroots and big environmentalism “all want the same things.” But it’s important to realize that communities don’t usually band together simply because “everybody” wants clean air and water. They do so more forcefully because their sense of place is threatened by dirty air and water. The reality of attacking a local threat is a much stronger motivator than an issue that is a diffuse and amorphous threat that attracts empathy and donations. The momentum generated by a movement serving actual communities and local constituencies presents an enormous advantage in terms of the payload it can deliver.

That is why it’s especially important for large, well-funded environmental groups to explore fresh ways to jump on local bandwagons, instead of the other way around. And the fastest way to satisfy the need for diversity in environmentalism is to build stronger connections to grassroots advocacy.

So how do we forge stronger bonds between the larger and more nationally influential organizations to invest more deeply in local work? One way is to better understand that local advocates are drivers and not passengers along for the environmental ride. It is important to remember that the civil rights movement was really a series of grassroots efforts, like the Selma march, of ordinary citizens determined to end racial injustice, not only locally but across the United States. Success came when they banded with others, locally and with other like-minded souls from around the country.

There is no greater calling than doing grassroots work that helps real people and real communities, as well as the nation and the planet.

About the author: Fred Tutman, Patuxent Riverkeeper, has served more than 11 years as the Riverkeeper for Maryland’s longest and deepest intrastate river. Fred also is an adjunct instructor at historic St. Mary’s College of Maryland, where he teaches an upper level course in Environmental Law and Policy.