

Leadership and Nonviolent Movements: Srdja Popovic

Guiding Question: Does a successful social movement require leadership? Does it require a strong leader?

Transcript:

One of the biggest misconceptions when you look to social change is that social change and social movements demand strong leaders. This is the misconception we keep meeting all over.

First of all, we don't want to put an equal sign between leadership and charismatic leaders. It is very useful for a movement or a country to have charismatic leaders. There are many historic examples, just to name [Mohandas Gandhi](#) or [Martin Luther King](#), where you had the leaders running the movements, being an inspiration, being a strategist, being a philosopher, being public figures, being CEOs of these movements.

Then you have another set of movements where you have a more symbolic role of leadership. You want to name [Nelson Mandela](#), who was sitting in jail for so long; [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) obviously spending years under house arrest in Burma; but they were an inspiration to their people.

Now you are witnessing the completely new breed of movements, even called leaderless movements. So you have this kind of hidden leadership that operates the movement, and people don't want to be seen, whether because the people lost faith in traditional leadership in the society or they are just afraid that the government will come and kill them all. But in any case, you really don't see the charismatic leaders.

There are many movements like this that were successful in the past. Who was the leader of the Chilean movement or the Serbian movement? You can't really point to a figure. But these movements were efficient.

But leadership is needed. Leadership is needed in nonviolent movements, leadership is needed in successful countries. There are so many roles of leadership. Whether we are talking about individual leaders or group leadership, there must be somebody to lead these movements, there must be somebody to formulate the vision, there must be somebody to achieve the unity, there must be somebody taking credit or giving other credit for success, there must be somebody taking the responsibility for mistakes. That's the basic role of leadership. So the world needs a lot of leadership.

The good news is that you need a little bit of talent to be a leader, but, like in music, like when you are playing a violin, the talent is only part of the deal. You can train people in leadership

skills, and leadership skills are transferable. There must be an effort to make those leadership skills more available to the people.

I have met so many different groups. We work with groups from 46 different countries. You can't imagine the kind of talented young people in their early 20s that I have met in the craziest countries of this world. They must be equipped with the toolbox to emerge as real leaders, because, believe me, the talent is there.

Additional Critical Thinking Questions:

What does Popovic characterize as the difference between leadership and a leader?

What is an example of a social movement in history or in the present that did not have a strong leader? How was it organized? Was it successful?

What is an example of a social movement in history or in the present that did have a strong leader? How was it organized? Was it successful?

Do you think technology is changing the need for strong leaders in social movements? Why or why not?