

Beauty Parlors, Barbershops, and Boardrooms

What leaders of corporate change can learn from the American civil rights movement.

by Leslie F. (“Skip”) Griffin Jr.

For the past few years, I’ve made a good part of my living helping companies and organizations through sustained change and transformation. I fell into this profession when a friend invited me to sit in on a meeting with a group of experts on dialogue. I walked in late, and one of the leaders, a writer and Massachusetts Institute of Technology instructor named Bill Isaacs, was standing at a flip chart, diagramming a new theory of in-depth change in corporations.

“Where did you get this from?” I asked. It was like seeing the events of my life laid out on a spiral path. I had grown up in the middle of one of the most significant change initiatives in modern history: the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. My father, the Reverend L. Francis Griffin Sr., was a preacher in a Baptist church in Prince Edward County, Va., during those years. He organized some of the students who were plaintiffs in the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared that “separate but equal” segregated schools

were unconstitutional. (The case, officially called *Oliver L. Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, et al.*, merged five separate cases from four states; my father’s case, *Davis et al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, et al.*, was one of these.) Our house was a hub of activity, and from a very early age I had a ringside seat to the movement’s evolution.

Many people think of the civil rights movement as a wave of change sparked by a few charismatic leaders. On December 1, 1955, or so the story goes, a woman named Rosa Parks was riding a segregated bus in Montgomery, Ala. Her feet were tired and she refused to give up her seat and move to the back. She was arrested. People got angry and called a rally, and the community leaders selected a young minister named Martin Luther King Jr. to speak. He led a boycott that lasted more than a year, ending segregation in the Montgomery bus system. That success propelled him to national fame as the leader of a movement that eventually broke down the political barriers to racial equality.

All of those things certainly



happened, but they don't add up to anything close to the whole story. The movement was neither accidental nor spontaneous. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was already a deliberate effort under way, starting with quiet meetings in homes, barbershops, beauty parlors, and churches throughout the South, to create a dialogue about the changes that were needed. This was the start of the movement. I've since realized that all organizations that sustain a significant transformation undergo the same sort of evolution. If you want to know how a change really came about, be it the civil rights movement or a corporate transformation, you have to understand the parts that are less visible: the deep, profound patterns of activity under the surface.

Gathering and Discovery

My father, like many black men, had served in World War II. Most of them had originally been sent to Europe to take care of the kitchens and dig trenches. In the heat of the war, they were called to fight alongside white soldiers, equally valued and valuable. This was a source of great pride. But it subsequently produced a backlash back home, where many Southern whites were not ready to welcome returning black servicemen as equals. When they got home, some black soldiers were lynched in their uniforms. "We fought for the country to save democracy," my father and his counterparts decided, "and we're going to have it here." They didn't know how to make this happen, but they were suddenly compelled to figure it out.

My earliest memory — and I thought everyone grew up this way — was of people sitting in our living

room, exchanging papers and reading books, talking about the world they wanted to create. They were driven by aspiration, as much as by hurt and outrage, to seek out models of change. From sources that included the biblical stories of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount, along with the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Mahatma Gandhi, they developed a collective concept of how they could create change in America. I now believe that this type of discipline and commitment, which enables a group to hold and nurture a new collective intelligence, is important to the success of any change initiative.

When I was 12, I began accompanying my father on his preaching trips, and we would stay up in late-night discussions at local universities or private homes, talking about the nature of legal segregation in the South and about the more subtle caste system in the rest of America. We knew that there could be something better, an interracial world, where people were treated with respect and opportunities were prevalent, regardless of any factor like skin color. But what would such a world look like?

In those years, it was illegal in many Southern states to register black voters or to provide equal access to public facilities or integrated schools. Protest against any of these conditions was unthinkable. So the invitation list to these conversations could mean the difference between life and death; you had to gather people who could be depended on, who wouldn't betray the confidential identity of others in the room. Some of those people were lawyers, often representing people who had been arrested.

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Thurgood Marshall, who later became a Supreme Court justice, participated in many of these sessions in his early years. People often conducted what might be called a discovery process: identifying who else, in the next county or state, might be doing something similar.

It turned out that there were many more people active in relevant networks than anyone would otherwise have noticed. Many were preachers, and the movement rapidly spread to places where people could congregate without raising suspicion: the churches first, and then the beauty parlors and barber-shops. These rapidly became known as information hubs, places to find out what was going on, but they were more than that. Marxist labor leaders had tried to organize in the South, largely without success, but

when a large number of people begin to speak about something new in a language that all of them understand. The conversations develop into something larger than the sum of their parts, and this affects people, in the same way that a magnetic field affects the position of iron filings within it. It got to the point where Dr. King and other preachers would start talking and the audience would finish with them, in unison, though they hadn't heard that particular sermon before. (Later, Dr. King would be accused of plagiarism, but he was simply tapping the same field of conversation as the other speakers.) I remember being in the crowd listening to sermons and feeling the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I've learned that others have felt something similar at momentous transi-

McLeod Bethune, a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's, had started the National Council of Negro Women to teach women how to can food and make clothing, with the aim of raising healthy children. By the late 1950s, this group had 500,000 women members; they ran the charity events, like chicken sales and baby contests, that kept many churches alive. Under its subsequent president, Dorothy Height, the council played a critical role in organizing people and building awareness. Another key organization was the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, led by A. Philip Randolph, the first successful effort to organize black labor. My father and I rode up and down the East Coast without buying a ticket; and the group would carry notes from one leader to another. We didn't have to use the postal system. The black universities, such as Howard and Morehouse, and key fraternities such as Omega Psi Phi, became focusing points. So did a renowned institute called the Highlander Folk School, which a former divinity student named Miles Horton had started as a place where people could conduct interracial discussions about changing the social climate of the Southern states. It was Highlander faculty members Septima Clark and Zilphia Horton, along with Pete Seeger, who adapted a gospel hymn into the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." Rosa Parks was a student there, not long before the Montgomery bus incident in 1955.

Doing It Ourselves

In short, by the time Rosa Parks's feet got tired, a large field of conversational energy was already in place. There had also been several dress

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this new network of civil rights preachers — people like Sam Proctor, C.T. Vivian, Wyatt T. Walker, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King Jr., my father, and many others — used the language people already knew, the language of the Bible. Sermons about the racist society as Pharaoh's kingdom resonated with just about everyone who heard them, from illiterate men and women who made their living scrubbing floors to college professors who had learned Greek and Hebrew so they could study the roots of democracy.

Something uncanny happens

tions, from the end of Communism in Eastern Europe to the fall of apartheid in South Africa to the pivotal moment in particularly effective organizational transformations. It feels as if the energy in the arena has been turned up, as if there is something crackling through the people who are present.

But energy like that also needs to be contained; if it continues without boundaries, it dissipates. In the case of the civil rights movement, a variety of groups gradually took on the authority and legitimacy to "contain" the movement, and structure and amplify it. Mary

rehearsals for her act of defiance. The Prince Edward County court case had started with one of them. The high school was a ramshackle brick building and two tarpaper shacks, far too small to hold all the kids. A 16-year-old student named Barbara Johns couldn't take it any more; she spent days in the woods near the farm where she lived, writing in a journal that was later found and quoted in histories of the movement. One day she wrote, "I wish a storm would come along and blow down the school. Then they would have to rebuild it and give us everything we want. But that's not going to happen." Soon afterward, she wrote that she wished the storm would come and then a "rich white Northern man" would build a new school. "But that's not going to happen either."

Still later, she wrote just one line: "If we want it to change, we have to do it ourselves." She came back to school, and she and three friends sat out in the middle of the athletic field where nobody could hear them. To all appearances they were talking about dating and sports. But they were organizing a boycott. Each of them began talking to other friends whom they trusted not to say anything. Finally, one April day, all 450 students walked out of the high school, into the heart of town, on a visible strike. This took courage beyond courage, but it wasn't unique; another group of students staged a similar walkout that year in South Carolina, which ultimately became the basis for one of the other *Brown* plaintiff cases.

Barbara knew my father through her uncle, the Reverend Vernon Johns, a brilliant man who was my father's mentor and my own. He was also Martin Luther

King Jr.'s predecessor as the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. My father joined the case as an advocate for all the black children in the county and their parents. When the courts ruled that the schools had to be integrated, the local government locked the schools in response, which meant that for several years, the black students of Prince Edward County, including me, had no formal education. (The white students went to segregated academies using a voucher system invented for that purpose.) And we responded, in turn, by doing something that turned out to be absolutely critical: continuing to hold the aspiration that we would eventually have state-run integrated schools. In fact, many of us kept following the same lessons and reading the same books that we were missing so that when the schools finally reopened, we could resume the levels commensurate with our ages.

The move into the courts demanded a more formal "container": a legitimate structure to hold and represent our point of view in the mainstream. The main group that stepped up to this role was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and specifically its Legal Defense Fund, headed by Thurgood Marshall. From the 1930s to the early 1960s, if you had an NAACP membership card in the South, you could be fired...or killed. Rosa Parks happened to be the secretary of her local chapter.

This structure, formal and informal, was the real power behind Rosa Parks, the reason she could stop the whole bus. She had been preparing for that moment, and so had the whole community; they had spent years building their capacity

to unite. When the protests began in Montgomery, the leaders called Martin Luther King Jr. to speak.

The Movement's Time

It is not easy to understand the phenomenon of Martin Luther King Jr. in any conventional way. He had no army, no political apparatus, and no publishing arm. His organization, called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), had only 175 employees at its height in 1963. By then, Dr. King and others had been speaking throughout the South; there were demonstrations in more than 100 cities and towns in 1963. No organization as small as the SCLC could have set up that level of activity by itself.

I've read newspaper accounts of those events, and they're all eerily similar. They make Dr. King sound like a mysterious, magical figure, capable of appearing in southern Alabama in the morning and northern Kentucky in the afternoon. Of course, he wasn't in all those places. But he was the most visible aspect of the field, which had grown so strong that it was impossible to ignore anywhere in the U.S. It was like a living example of the old Hindu saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

As Dr. King became more visible, other preachers heard his messages and repeated them in their own ways. Television carried the signal further, amplifying it into the kind of *noosphere*, or large-scale network of intention, that Teilhard de Chardin has written about. After John F. Kennedy's assassination, Dr. King tapped into a wave of change that gave him enough power to deal, one on one, with President Lyndon Baines Johnson. The two men needed each other; President Johnson

for legitimacy after the assassination, and Dr. King for tangible results. In his book *Judgment Days* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), journalist Nick Kotz describes the way this relationship led directly to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The relationship had taken 20 years to build. It was a relationship not between two men, but between a movement (in part, a religious movement, a movement of God) and a national government. I've met many people of action who don't understand that each change process has its own natural period of gestation. They don't have the patience to wait that long for it; they want it now. But it took all those years for the field to develop — or, if you prefer, for people, inside and outside the movement, to be ready to handle the change they were creating.

A poster embodied the spirit of the time; it showed an old black man who had obviously worked hard all his life. "Hands that once picked cotton," it said, "can now pick presidents." But when I escorted older black people to the polls in 1965, some of them got up to the registration door but could not cross the threshold, even though they had wanted it with all their hearts for years. "I can't do this voting," they'd say. The transformation outside in society hadn't yet been matched by a transformation inside their own identity. Or, as my father used to say, "It didn't take the Lord 40 years to get the children of Israel out of the wilderness. It took 40 years to get the wilderness out of *them*."

I believe that Nelson Mandela understood this before his release in 1990. In prison, he insisted that his African National Congress compatriots treat the guards with respect,

remain in good physical shape, and keep their haircuts. He knew they would be old when they got out, but that they would have to run the government nonetheless; in his mind, they were already the South African government in exile. The guards started to call him Mr. Mandela and treat him as a significant individual. Because he was already taking the part of a great man while in prison, he and his colleagues were ready to assume the role of leadership when they emerged.

Today I work with people who are trying to institute profound changes within their organizations. Those who succeed understand that the change occurs in its own time. It can't be hurried by throwing managers at it, any more than you can hurry a baby along by putting more doctors in the maternity ward. You need to do all the things we did in the civil rights movement: to discover the nature of the needed change, to gather the many people who believe in a similar transformation, to let a field of energy evolve, to "contain" that field inside some new formal structures, and to recognize and amplify the leadership that rises to the surface. I saw the same kinds of shifts at the *Boston Globe*; I believe they take place in all movements of change, including such diverse groups as the American conservatives after the defeat of Barry Goldwater and the Eastern European dissidents before the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's not just the structures that have to change. And it's not just the culture out there in the organization. It's the culture in here, in ourselves, as well — the culture that leads us up to the threshold, and then, if we're ready, gives us the courage to step across. +

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