

## **Strategic Leaders Guide and Direct Movement to Get Results**

**By John C. Maxwell**

When driving, have you ever approached a busy intersection with a non-working traffic signal? The scene is generally one of chaos and confusion. Hesitant drivers gingerly inch their vehicles forward until they're certain it's their turn to cross the intersection. Other, more daring drivers speed through the intersection, presuming that less aggressive drivers will yield them the right-of-way. Lacking authoritative guidance on how to proceed, people do whatever they think is best. The result is disorder and inefficiency.

As illustrated by the nightmarish intersection, movement without strategy gets nowhere. For movement to make a difference it must be guided and directed by a unifying plan. "Leader" is the name history gives to the person who steps forward to channel the energies of people into productive outcomes by providing clear strategy.

### **The Strategic Leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

In the 1950s and 1960s, black Americans stepped up their resistance to the system of racial oppression that relegated them to second-class status in society. For example, in 1955 Rosa Parks defied orders to move from her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1960 four college freshmen in Greensboro, NC refused to leave when denied service at a lunch counter. While such valiant acts played a vital role in emboldening the black community to challenge racism in society, they were not part of a coordinated strategy to combat institutional racism.

The genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. lay in his ability to unite the many voices speaking out against racism into an orchestrated chorus of non-compliance. Under his leadership, impromptu protests were replaced by premeditated mass demonstrations, and spontaneous sit-ins gave way to organized boycotts and marches. His strategic guidance pooled the influence of like-minded individuals and groups, and gave the civil rights movement the force it needed to prevail.

### **Strategy of Confrontation**

*"What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program that will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible." ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.*

King knew hope wasn't a strategy. Having been denied their rights for the entirety of United States' history, African-Americans could not expect change by politely working through the usual political channels. The quest for racial equality would require radical activism. As King noted, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott, King conceived of a national strategy of widespread non-cooperation to challenge racist institutions. He worked with fellow civil rights leaders to engineer public displays of mass resistance: marches, sit-ins, and protests. The scale of the demonstrations attracted media attention. They also forced racist authorities into a lose-lose situation. When the local police allowed the marches and sit-ins, the civil rights movement appeared strong. Yet, when choosing to harass and imprison peaceful protestors, the police looked cruel and hateful. Regardless of how local law enforcement responded to the demonstrations, the civil rights movement picked up steam, eroding the power bases of racial prejudice.

King saw the need for radical activism, but he also understood the importance of restraint. By resorting to violence, the civil rights movement would sacrifice the moral high ground. By responding to hatred with hatred, they would be seen as no better than their bigoted oppressors. On the other hand, if the civil rights protestors could remain peaceful, even when the victims of violence, they would expose the ugliness and malice of racism. Thanks to the strategy of composure and self-control preached by King, demonstrators remained non-violent, even when brutalized by nightsticks and showered with tear gas. Their poise and courage pricked the conscience of the nation, and furthered the cause of justice.

### **Summary**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. exerted his influence to unite the civil rights movement behind the strategies of mass resistance and non-violence. In doing so, he channeled its energies to bring about widespread social change. This month, as we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. King, we can also draw inspiration from his strategic leadership.



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