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My Role in a Social Change Ecosystem: A Mid-Year Check-In

Deepa Iyer · May 13, 2019 · 4 min read

At the beginning of 2019, I shared a reflection about how to move off the seesaw of outrage and numbness that many of us find ourselves on these days. To my surprise, so many of you resonated with the image and guiding questions in that reflection, and used it in your own work and at your organizations. I've edited the image and guiding questions in light of conversations I have had and the helpful feedback I have received. I hope that this framework continues to be useful in your mid-year individual and organizational check-ins.

In our lives and as part of movements and organizations, many of us play different roles in pursuit of equity, liberation, inclusion, and justice.

My Role in a Social Change Ecosystem

Equity
Inclusion
Liberation
Justice
Solidarity
Resiliency
Interdependency

Healers · Artists · Storytellers · Bridge-Builders · Frontline Responders · Caregivers · Disrupters · Visionaries · Builders

Some of us are **frontline responders** who quickly and ably transition into rapid-response mode instinctively and organize resources, networks, and messages.

Some of us are **healers** who tend to the individual and intergenerational traumas of white supremacy, racism, colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and nativism.

Some of us are community **storytellers** and **artists**, binding the past and the present, channeling the histories and experiences of our ancestors to shed light on what is possible today.

Some of us are natural **bridge builders** who can work across divisions with patience and compassion.

Some of us are proud **disruptors** who speak up and take action — especially when it is uncomfortable and risky.

Some of us are **caregivers** who provide nourishment to organizers, exude concern and love, and create a community of care.

Some of us are **visionaries**, with the ability to find, articulate, and reconnect us to our north star, even when we cannot clearly see the sky.

And others of us are **builders** who are actively developing the ideas, the structures, and the scaffolding for our organizations and movements.

Not all of us can (or should) play each of these roles. We might also find ourselves falling into different roles depending on personal and external circumstances. Or, we might be observers and supporters from the side from time to time. An effective, healthy, and sustainable social change ecosystem requires different actors to play these roles, and often, at different times.

Here are some **guiding questions** to use along with the image above.

- What role(s) do I feel comfortable and natural playing, and why? What role(s) make me come alive, and why? Are there any differences between these two responses for me to explore?

- What role(s) am I often asked to step into by others? How do I feel about assuming those roles?

- What is the impact of these roles on me physically, energetically, emotionally, and spiritually? Is there an impact on others as a result?

- How can I stretch myself? Where can I take bolder risks, especially if I hold different forms of privilege? What do I need to learn more about before I do that, and who can teach me how to do that?

- Am I visioning and dreaming in my role? Or am I caught in a cycle of repetition and redundancy, or compromise and sacrifice? How can I generate creativity and innovation?

- How do I move through different roles without feeling like I have to pick just one in order to be effective? At the same time, how can I make sure that I'm not a wanderer or a short-term amateur? Or positioning myself as an expert within a silo?

- If I work in or adjacent to the non-profit and movement ecosystem, how am I holding onto purpose especially given the pulls and contradictions of **purity** (proving "wokeness"), **productivity** (maintaining constant performance and output at the cost of overwork, replication, martyrdom, and low impact), **personality** (the over-emphasis on celebrity activism and social media relevancy), and **perfectionism** (expecting to get it right all the time and being afraid to own up to mistakes)?

- When (and not if) I make mistakes, how do I acknowledge them and course correct without feeling like I've failed?

- Who is my support system — the people who hold me accountable in a compassionate way? Write their names into the various roles if they play them, or on the sides. How can I widen this community? What have I asked of them in terms of support?

Organizations could answer the same questions with an eye towards understanding and assessing how they function as part of a campaign, coalition, network, or ecosystem, and how they can course correct or deepen their impact.

People and groups, from non-profits to teachers to students to "professional" activists, have used the image and guiding questions at staff meetings and retreats as well as to aid with your own personal reflections and check-ins. I hope you'll do so as well! And, if you have feedback, I'd love to hear it. Please drop me a line at deepa@deepaiyer.com.

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