



THE FIVE STAGES OF PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT

Jennifer Dulski

Meaningful purpose is the key to launching any movement.

While at Change.org, I got a unique perspective into the world of decision-makers because of the more than one thousand campaigns started every day on the site asking people and institutions for change. From the data, I've seen that there are a series of predictable stages decision-makers tend to go through as they react to campaigns that are directed at them. I call them the Five Stages of Engagement: denial, listening, acceptance, embracing, and empowering. Not all decision-makers go through each of the five stages, but we do see each of these stages play out on a regular basis.

Understanding the stages can help you be more effective in persuading decision-makers that you are working to influence. In particular, helping decision-makers see the risks that come from denial and the benefits that come from listening and then acting can help you make your own case more persuasive. For the purposes of describing each stage briefly below, I've referenced petitions to corporate decision-makers, since they take place in a shorter time frame and clearly demonstrate each stage. Nevertheless, these stories illustrate the way decision-makers of all types react to appeals for change.

The Five Stages of Engagement

1. DENIAL | The first stage in this process, as with the five stages of grief, is denial. Some decision-makers would prefer to stick to business as usual and act as if nothing is changing around them. A good example here is SeaWorld— well-regarded business that came under intense pressure after a 2013 documentary called Blackfish criticized the treatment of orcas held in captivity at water parks, including their properties. There was major public outcry, expressed in part through dozens of campaigns on Change.org. Although SeaWorld initially tried to actively fight the criticism, even running a pro-orca SeaWorld advertising campaign, partners started to pull away and business receded dramatically as public dissent grew. Eventually, they were forced to take action. In March 2016, SeaWorld decided to stop orca breeding as well as orca shows, instead redirecting its focus to educational programs.

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Surprisingly, after years of denying the issue, the move turned out to be better for their business in the end. According to *New York* magazine, “The existential battle they had been so desperately fighting was over something that people didn’t even want anymore. ... [A] survey of 2,400 people across the country, found that ... SeaWorld’s favorability score would rise 11 to 27 points.” If they had been able to move from denial faster, SeaWorld could have spared itself the huge hit to its reputation and saved tens of millions of dollars. If you can help decision-makers understand that taking action may not only protect their reputation but also be better for their business, you’ll have a better chance of getting the outcome you want.

2. LISTENING | The second stage is listening, when decision-makers can’t or aren’t yet ready to do what is being asked of them, but want to engage and have a dialogue to show they are willing to hear feedback. Sometimes just being heard, knowing that your voice matters, and starting a dialogue can be huge steps in driving your movement forward. An initial request for just a meeting or a conversation may be a less threatening way to start a relationship with a decision-maker—and it may lead to further action.

At the end of 2014, Renee Posey, an Old Navy customer, started a campaign on Change.org. She was frustrated that Old Navy charged more for plus-size clothing for women, whereas plus-size men’s clothing wasn’t priced at a premium. Renee’s petition gained nearly 100,000 signatures. National media including the *Good Morning America* picked up the story, leading to a fair amount of backlash for Old Navy. But then the company decided to meet with Renee and listen to what she had to say. Renee wasn’t a critic of Old Navy; she was a customer. And she loved the brand; she just wanted to see fair treatment between men and women. In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, Renee explained that during a conference call with three executives from Old Navy and its parent company, Gap Inc., she asked that they start thinking about a plan to address consumer concerns—namely, to eliminate the differential in plus-size clothing prices, make a larger selection of new plus-size styles available, and change their return policy so that online plus-size purchases could be exchanged in stores.

Instead of getting defensive, the executives made it clear to Renee that they understood her concerns and intended to do something about them. Though they didn't agree to all of her asks right away, they did agree to take some important immediate steps. They began accepting plus-size returns in stores and put together an advisory group of plus-size women, including Renee, to better understand that part of their customer base. While she didn't get everything she'd wanted all at once, and some of the signers of her petition were upset by that, Renee was so happy that Old Navy listened and took action that she marked the campaign a victory and wrote an update to the signers praising Old Navy and Gap Inc. for their initial steps.

If you let decision-makers know that you are open to starting with a conversation in which all parties can express their perspectives, it can serve as a starting point to prompt potential action. There may be alternative solutions to a problem that can only be discovered by listening to each other.

3. ACCEPTANCE | Stage three is acceptance: decision-makers listen to the people asking them for change, agree that what they are asking for makes sense, and then decide to do what is being asked of them. It is just “acceptance,” though, because while they agree to make the change, they don't go any further to more deeply engage with their customers or constituents around it, or promote it to make it a core part of their platform or brand.

A survivor of workplace sexual assault started a petition in 2013 asking LinkedIn to create a blocking feature. She had quit her job but was stalked by her harasser on LinkedIn. She used two techniques we already know are effective: she shared her personal story to make the problem more visceral, and used data to make her case more persuasive, noting that all other major social networks already had a blocking feature, except for LinkedIn. Her campaign was effective: LinkedIn did launch a blocking feature, and Paul Rockwell, head of trust and safety at LinkedIn, posted a decision-maker response and said, “We know members have requested a blocking feature on LinkedIn. I come to you today to assure you that your concerns

were heard loud and clear. We built this feature not only because it was a feature our members requested, but because we also knew it was the right thing to do.” The reaction from their customers was very positive, and they got some reasonable press coverage from it as well, mainly from people happy to hear that the feature was finally available. You are in good shape if you can persuade a decision-maker to get all the way to the acceptance stage.

4. EMBRACING | The fourth stage of engagement is embracing, when decision-makers actively embrace the requests from the people who are asking them for change. They make changes that go beyond what movement leaders ask for, and potentially promote the changes that they are making in order to cultivate an even more loyal and excited set of customers or constituents. When Laura Coryton from London, England, learned in 2015 that tampons and other sanitary products were assessed an extra 5 percent value-added tax (VAT) that is typically assigned to “luxury” items such as helicopters and exotic meats like alligator, she was shocked. So she launched a campaign called #EndTamponTax, gathered 320,000 signatures, and persuaded the British government to pass a law confirming that sanitary products are essential, not luxury items, and to abolish the tax. It has since become a massive movement, spawning sister campaigns in other countries that tax sanitary products as luxury items, like France, Germany, Australia, and Malaysia.

However, although the law was passed in 2016, the actual tax will still be in effect until 2018. In mid- 017, Tesco, one of the largest supermarkets in the UK, stepped forward to engage with their customers around this issue. Instead of just waiting for the tax to go away, they decided to lower the price by 5 percent on nearly one hundred sanitary products to make up for the 5 percent tax. This was a huge win for their brand and extremely well received by their customers. Furthermore, it will likely be a financial win as customers flock to Tesco for its lower prices. Laura now has an active petition asking other supermarkets and pharmacies to follow Tesco’s lead.

5. EMPOWERING | The final stage of the engagement is empowering, and this is where the process flips upside down. In this final stage, decision-makers actually empower their consumers or their constituents to act on their behalf and to become advocates in support of the causes the decision-makers care about. In effect, the decision-maker has now become the movement starter. Some companies, like Airbnb, Lyft, and Uber, have begun to empower their customers (or potential customers) to advocate on the brands' behalf with local legislators to allow their services in various cities.

Luanne Calvert, then CMO of Virgin America and mastermind behind their viral safety video, had already helped to build the airline into a movement. She knew that Virgin had customers so passionate that they would get behind the brand if they were asked. When it came time to negotiate with the Dallas airport authority to try to get access to two gates that were becoming available at Dallas Love Field airport, Virgin America went straight to its customers. Virgin rallied its loyal supporters by starting a Change.org petition asking people to sign if they supported the idea of Virgin America getting the two gates at the Dallas airport. Virgin called the campaign “Free Love Field”—and won. With 27,000 signatures in two weeks, Virgin secured the two gates and created a huge business win and victory for its brand.

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Purpose Is a Bridge Builder

Movements are often most effective when they unite many disparate threads and appeal to many different people. A clear sense of purpose can provide a source of unity. Özgecan Aslan, a nineteen-year-old Turkish university student, was murdered in 2015 on a minibus in Mersin, Turkey, as she resisted an attempted rape. She had been the last person left on a minibus when the driver diverted the route and drove into a nearby forest and tried to rape her. When she resisted by using pepper spray, he stabbed her several times and beat her to death with an iron rod. He then called his father and a friend to help him dispose of the body. They burned her body and cut off Özgecan's hands to try to destroy evidence in the case.

When Gözde Salur, a young Turkish woman, heard about Özgecan, she couldn't help but feel that such a crime could easily have happened to her. Gözde was also a university student at the time, and she commuted to and from school on the same kind of minibus that Özgecan's attacker drove. The news scared her, and though she had never been involved in political activism, her sense of connection to a woman she had never met and frustration about a culture that tolerated this kind of violence against women spurred her to act. She said that "crimes against women are a part of our everyday lives. But the brutal murder of Özgecan was a last straw. My conscience, my heart, could not handle hearing that one more suspect had been let off in court just because he wore a nice suit." That was the moment she realized she wanted to take action.

Gözde started a petition to pass "Özgecan's Law" to prevent reduced sentences for those convicted of violence against women based on "good behavior" or "unjust provocation." Soon, despite how fractured her country was politically, she saw that people were coming together around her campaign to mobilize for justice after this brutal crime. A sense of shared purpose had created a community of people united in this one goal, even if they were divided in others. When the signatures on her petition started to increase, she said to me, "It showed me that regardless of political views, social position, and everything else, people can still come together

in Turkey to raise their voices in support of such an important issue. I received messages from very, very different people through Change.org and through Facebook and my Twitter account. These people had very different political views. Some of them were conservatives, some of them were very liberal. But they all told me, 'We are with you. If there's anything we can do, please let us know.' And this showed me that we could connect in such moments. This gave me a lot of hope that there's still many things that this society can do when we come together."

Gözde's work paid off: 1.2 million people signed the petition. Those 1.2 million people made hers the most-signed Change.org campaign of all time in Turkey. And while the law has not yet passed due to the ongoing political upheaval resulting from the attempted 2016 military coup, Parliament is considering a draft proposal for the law. Furthermore, the three men convicted in the murder of Özgecan were all given life sentences, showing a marked shift in the treatment of men who commit crimes against women. People from a wide variety of perspectives and backgrounds united around Gözde's vision for Özgecan's Law and became part of the movement to create harsher penalties for perpetrators of violence against women.

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Be Purposeful

We live in a world that is increasingly divided, angry, and scared, torn apart by war, political division, and rising racism and bigotry. A world where nuclear proliferation is again an increasing threat, where climate change places entire species, cities, and ultimately our planet at risk; where young girls are being denied education, trafficked, and sold into marriages; and where it seems like we are more divided in our worldviews than ever before. All of these challenges can seem overwhelming.

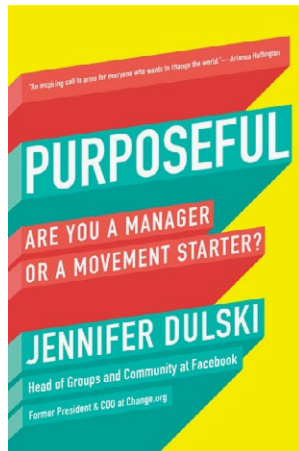
The world needs hope. The thing is, I believe we already have hope. It lives within all of us and appears in what we do and say, and how we treat each other. It's vibrant in some of us and dormant in others, but at our core, the hope we so desperately need already exists within us. We are the leaders the world needs right now. Look past the heartbreaking headlines of violence and intolerance, and you'll find stories of profound kindness, generosity, and courage.

We all have the power to make a difference. Maybe you'll start your own campaign and see it through to victory, overcoming obstacles and mobilizing supporters. Or maybe you'll join someone else's movement, adding your voice to a chorus that proclaims, "This matters." You might start a community of passionate people who can then mobilize to create change. Or maybe you'll propose a new idea that makes your workplace better or start a new business that solves a big problem. Whatever you do, action, creativity, and passion count. Now more than ever.

And you already have most of the tools you need. In fact, we all have the power to inspire people and spark movements around issues that matter. **Whatever your movement or your cause, you have the ability to affect people's lives.** 🌱



Info



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Jennifer Dulski is the head of Groups and Community at Facebook. She has more than 15 years of experience at successful startups and big-brand internet companies, including as a business unit leader at Yahoo! and as CEO of The Dealmap, which was acquired by Google in 2011. She was most recently president and COO of Change.org. Dulski writes about leadership, management and entrepreneurship for LinkedIn Influencers, *Fortune*, *Huffington Post*, and other media outlets.



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