

Celebrating Ella Baker and Her “Group-Centered Leadership”

Ella Baker’s Legacy: A Different Model of Leadership

As a community organizer, Ella Baker brought a different style of leadership to the civil rights movement—one that contrasted with the traditional model that celebrated a few charismatic individuals. Baker believed in deemphasizing top organizational figureheads and instead cultivating the abilities of everyday people to collectively join together and take action. She upheld the idea that organizations should be run by those most impacted by the problems the organization is trying to solve.

In a June 12, 2015 article in Colorlines, Barbara Ransby discussed Baker’s approach to leadership:

Although she objected to the top-down, predominately male leadership structures that were typical of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the NAACP in the 1950s and ’60s, she realized the necessity for grounded, community-based leader-organizers such as sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer and Cleveland, Mississippi-based local organizer Amzie Moore. Baker was not against leadership. She was opposed to hierarchical leadership that disempowered the masses and further privileged the already privileged.

When Oprah Winfrey complained that recent protests against police violence lack leadership, she was describing [Martin Luther King’s] style of leading, or at least the way in which the King legacy has been most widely branded: the reverend as the strong, all-knowing, slightly imperfect but still not-like-us type of leader.

Baker represented a different leadership tradition altogether. She combined the generic concept of leadership— “a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”—and a confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solutions. Baker helped everyday people channel and congeal their collective power to resist oppression and fight for sustainable, transformative change....

That collective effort required leaders who were accountable to one another and were not singular. There were many organizers in groups such as SNCC who modeled Baker’s brand of what sociologist Charles Payne has called “group-centered leadership.”

Rather than someone with a fancy title standing at a podium speaking for or to the people, group-centered leaders are at the center of many concentric circles. They strengthen the group, forge consensus and negotiate a way forward. That kind of leadership is impactful, democratic, and, I would argue, more radical and sustainable, than the alternatives.

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>

Another way in which Baker’s leadership style contrasted with the norm within many civil rights organizations was her emphasis on valuing the contributions of women. Baker was opinionated and outspoken, even when social norms held that women should be quiet and deferential. At both the SCLC

and NAACP, she protested the fact that formal power rested in the hands of men, who almost exclusively were given top offices, while women were relegated to support roles.

Congressperson John Lewis, himself a prominent civil rights activist, wrote in his memoir *Walking with the Wind*: “Long before people began using the term ‘male chauvinism,’ Ella Baker was describing it and denouncing it in the civil rights movement, and she was right. There were very, very few women getting credit for their work, and even fewer emerged into leadership positions.”

In a January 16, 2017 article for *Time* magazine, journalist Julie Scelfo notes that the prevalence of sexism, even within the movement, may be one reason that Baker is less well-known today than she might be otherwise:

Despite her level of experience and proven track record, [Martin Luther King, Jr.] had difficulty allowing a woman’s decisions to trump his own, and her idea was that the organization should devote its resources more to promoting and enabling its overall mission rather than celebrating a charismatic leader. Wyatt Tee Walker, an early SCLC board member, told the filmmaker Joanne Grant that the ministers’ refusal to follow Baker’s advice was in practice with the era’s norms. “This was before the days of women’s liberation,” he says in the 1981 film [Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker....](#)

Despite Baker’s gifts for leadership and oratory, the SCLC pastors, intent on preserving their patriarchal hierarchy, refused to allow her to share in their prestige.

<https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>

Scelfo goes on to discuss another reason why Ella Baker may be less well-known and widely celebrated today than some other civil rights activists:

Baker spent years of her life performing the essential—but far from glamorous—act of listening, a crucial first step in helping beleaguered Blacks develop enough self-worth to demand being treated with dignity in an environment where they had every reason to fear brutality and economic reprisal from their white neighbors. She also understood group dynamics and how to empower people to join forces, a delicate task that involves responding to a wide array of human feelings.

A narrative about this kind of work is inherently less dramatic and far more complicated than, say, the tale of a discreet act of bravery on a bus. But great leaders have recognized for centuries that high emotional intelligence, or the ability to recognize and respond to other people’s feelings, is central to successfully influencing them.

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Baker possessed this type of intelligence and infused it into her approach to organizing. In doing so, she paved the way for many young people and women to grow in their own leadership.

Today, her legacy can be seen in organizations like Black Lives Matter, which promote a “leaderful” and feminist style of organizing. Because of this, Baker not only helped change the world, she changed how people went about changing the world.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Did your perspective of the civil right movement change due to this reading? If so, how?
3. In what ways has sexism affected how we remember the civil rights movement? What were some ways that Ella Baker tried to intervene to highlight the work contributed by women?
4. What do you think about Ella Baker's style of leadership? What positives do you see? Are there any potential negatives you can think of? Explain your position.
5. Ella Baker believed that everyday people should be empowered to lead their own struggles against issues that directly affect them. Do you think this idea is relevant today? If so, how?
6. Think about the changes you think we need to see in this society. Do you think this change will be brought about only if great leaders emerge to make it happen?
7. Do you share some of Ella Baker's qualities, such as the ability to listen to others closely? Understand group dynamics? Encourage people to join forces? How might your talents be put to use for positive social change?