

Building Movement Capacity and Structure: Ella Baker and the Civil Rights Movement

By 350.org, [Daniel Hunter](#)

Ella Baker, Art on the Atlanta BeltLine Exhibition in 2018, Atlanta, Georgia. Credit: Thomas Cizauskas, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 DEED



Introduction

Take inspiration from this Civil Rights Movement story about how to build movement capacity and structure. Learn about Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee SNCC.

This article has been sourced from Daniel Hunter's book published by 350.org called [The Climate Resistance Handbook](#). Read below or see Chapter 3 on Growth and pgs 34 – 36. The images have been added by the Commons Library.

Growth

Organisers almost always have an endless list of to-do's. We have so many things to track. Who to call next. When to announce the next campaign. The website needs fixing. There's a conflict in the group that needs addressing. And few things make that list longer than a successful action!

After the action is over, there's a ton more things to plan. More people want to help out. More demands are placed on the organiser.

What makes a good organiser isn't someone who has completed their to-do list. It's someone who can manage that list with grace. It's someone who makes good choices about which things they do next.

And being a good organiser means finding new people to help out with that list. That means we have to develop a structure to grow. We need a way to absorb that energy and turn it into more capacity. Your group might be a formal organisation with a structure, board and funders (like the Brazil campaign). Or it might be a loose network (like the Mongolian youth organisation). Or it might be a few friends (like my anti-styrofoam campaign).

But it needs a way to handle that growth.

Take the US Civil Rights movement, right after the launch of the sit-in movement in February 1960. The campaign kicked off with four black men sitting at a segregated lunch counter. They were violently refused service. Within weeks, the student sit-in movement had grown across the country. Some groups had successes. Some groups faced failure at the hand of brutal mobs. But hundreds of young people, black and white, were joining the sit-ins and experimenting with that campaign model.

This caught the attention of national Civil Rights movement leaders, like Ella Baker. Ella Baker was a long-time organiser who listened to what was happening at the grassroots. She had made her own name for herself, organising campaigns for school reform and civil and women's rights across the US.

She was an organiser in the best sense: following the energy of the people, building up leaders, and always with an attitude of,

If we build strong leaders, we don't need strong organisations. – Ella Baker

She was then working at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She alerted Dr. King about the sit-in movement. The young people represented a new energy. They were disciplined and nonviolent, with escalated tactics.

They didn't believe in a single leader, and so they rotated who facilitated meetings. They were bold. They were inspiring and made waves. They injected new energy and urgency into the movement.

They were also chaotic and unorganized. They were unclear on direction and with little relationship to each other. So when Ella Baker convinced Dr. King to pull together a national gathering of the sit-in leaders, some were nervous. They worried they would be taken over by the older and more cautious groups. They knew the mainstream groups expected to be respected.

Dr. King also had to be convinced, because he had his own concerns. The young sit-in leaders benefited enormously from the work he and others had been doing. Those leaders and Civil Rights movement activists had tilled ground for the seeds the sit-in organisers

were planting. Dr. King had made enormous personal sacrifices and made in-roads into previously hostile territory. He knew the sit-in movement couldn't have taken hold without the media attention and allies that his earlier campaigns helped generate. (In fact, sit-ins that had happened years earlier never caught fire.)



Members of the North Carolina Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, shown at the Tottle House lunch counter in Atlanta in 1960, sparked sit-ins across the South. Library of Congress (CC BY-ND 2.0)

Many of the sit-in leaders idolised Dr. King. But others mocked him. They called him “Da Lawd,” and some joked about his careful approach. Dr. King worried that their sense that they had all the answers meant they would not work well with others.

These generational tensions are common dynamics in movements. We can relax when we see it. It happens. When it doesn't become overly personal and mean, it can inspire growth.

The meeting went ahead. Dr. King spoke. Other elders of the movement spoke. The unspoken goal was to organise the young people into Dr. King's organisation, the SCLC. Ella Baker moved beyond just her organisational role. She privately urged the students to develop their own organisation. She sensed their energy would be drained if they followed into the more stodgy SCLC.

She organised leaders in local SCLC chapters to send money and give official (and often unofficial) support to the sit-in organisers. And she spent hours over the nights talking with the sit-in leaders about what kind of movement structure they wanted to build. The sit-in organisers decided on a structure and a name.

They decided not to use the top-down structure of SCLC with its iconic Dr. King. Instead, they would rotate leaders and have everyone present at group meetings (which often meant their meetings ended late into the next morning!). They decided to be the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee — a name now known for winning key legislation to make sure blacks would be allowed to vote and stop vote suppression tactics.

Ella Baker showed some key lessons on being an ally to the movement.

She didn't direct, but she didn't only follow.

She didn't move based on her organisational role, but she listened for what this group of young people wanted to do. She did look ahead and see what they would need before they knew. She organised a chance to get together, protection from being overtaken, resources, and coaching on some of the details. (In her case, she soon quit SCLC and joined up with SNCC.)

But that need to create a structure is important for all movement groups.

About Book

This article is from the [Climate Resistance Handbook](#) which brings together a wealth of learnings from the climate justice movement. It starts with breaking social myths about how social movements win. Then dives into campaign tools and frameworks you can use. It closes with how to grow your group and use creative, impactful actions and tactics. This book is full of stories of climate warriors from around the globe and historical movements. It's filled with practical wisdom and inspiration to make you more effective, more active, and ready for what's next.

Reflection Questions:

- 1. How did Ella Baker's approach to leadership differ from traditional hierarchical models, and what impact did that have on the formation and success of SNCC?**

Consider how her emphasis on grassroots empowerment and rotating leadership shaped the movement's structure and sustainability.

- 2. What are the potential strengths and challenges of decentralized leadership in social movements, as demonstrated by the sit-in organizers?**

Reflect on how the lack of a single leader influenced decision-making, group cohesion, and external perceptions.

- 3. In what ways can established leaders and organizations support emerging movements without overpowering them?**

Think about Ella Baker's role as a bridge between generations and institutions, and how her actions balanced guidance with autonomy.