

Advocacy and Activism – Forces for Change



By Lizzi Larbalestier

In this article we are going to talk about two ways that passion can manifest when it comes to championing causes. Using Environment and Ocean Health as the inquiry framework, it struck me whilst modelling these two approaches how relevant the insights are for all aspects of leadership.

We see our teams and individuals becoming inspired by a cause or having their emotions ignited in some way to 'fight for' something they feel could or should change. Depending upon how and where they take their energy and attention, activism and advocacy emerge, each demonstrating a range of behaviours.

Of course, these two are not exclusive or independent of one another. It can, however, be useful for us as leaders and

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change-makers to notice the nuances of these – and, likewise, to identify these within ourselves because they will most certainly impact the results we deliver.

Before we dive in, it is important to note that both are viable options for influencing societal change and I have in

this article loosely generalised simply to create a discovery frame.

Activism and advocacy in action

I'll start with an example of a blend of these from three weeks ago:

I walk into a beachfront store and see some plastic rings (the currently popular frisbees with holes in them). I notice other items within the store (new stock arrivals) that are 'eco-friendly' buckets and spades with circular economy logos. I realise this trader is moving towards making wiser buying choices and, as a result, I like him already.

I joke with him that I am going to make an unpopular request of him, but first we chat about the local marine life and he agrees with me that the seals are



amazing. I ask him if he would consider not selling the flying ring frisbees, which can create a huge hazard for “our seal friends”; I give him just enough information to paint a picture of their impact. He is a small business and has invested in this product in good faith, not realising that these should never be used in a beach location or anywhere in nature where they might become lost. Horrified but empowered, he removes what he now refers to as “the seal killers” from sale. He is proud to talk about how and where he is taking the business and how these do not fit that vision.

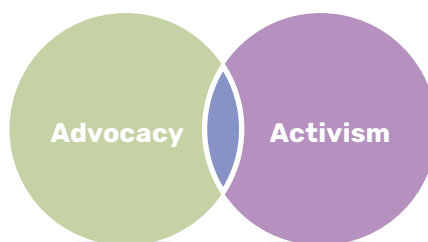
Direct and immediate action was needed, from a place of hope and love. The courage of activism with the passion of advocacy enabled a creative and compelling discussion with no fist thumping required. I was lucky: it appears that Andy, the shop owner, is **both an advocate and an activist**; he will tell others this story, as will I, and a ripple effect will continue.

So let's dip a toe in comparing the language associated with advocacy and activism:

- **Activism** has often been paired with words and phrases like agitation, protest, campaigning, revolution, battling inequality, applying pressure, radical action, a tactical response to social outcry, and supporting one side of a controversial issue. Some will define activism as action-orientated whilst perceiving advocacy as people-orientated – but it is more complex than this. At one end of a scale, activism can be combative, reactive and intense – whereas it can also be about encouraging grassroots activity, championing what is right and just, or encouraging communities to participate in activities to create immediate and, for them, tangible changes.
- **Advocacy** is described very differently, in ways such as using one's voice to influence change, gently amplifying a message, inspiring hope, creating deeper connection and accountability, promoting sustainable change, educating and convincing society. In the words of Eva Lewis of the human rights movement, advocacy emphasises listening whereas activism emphasises speaking – again though, the distinctions are less clear-cut since activism is often a result of feeling unheard and the advocate is often called upon to be a credible spokesperson. At one end of the scale of advocacy, the concern for optics and



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desire to assuage all stakeholders can lead to dilution of influence as risk-taking diminishes – and yet, without collective, collaborative, informed intent and buy in, sustainable and progressive change is unlikely.

When coaching leaders, they will of course observe a range of these behaviours within their teams. Encouraging them to value *both* activism and advocacy and to be curious about



the intent behind each will enable them to ensure they work with their teams on the causes that matter and develop their crews to be truly influential.

What might leaders see?

The **activist** might project frustration and agitation; they will be looking for things to change quickly and likely will have their attention chunked down to something specific. They might emphasise ‘away from’ and scarcity before discussing ‘towards’ and options – which can appear as though complaining through leading with what is missing or wrong. Facts and data will be abundant as a motivator and their listening could be limited. They will want to be heard and to know action is coming fast, and they will seek autonomy to take and encourage action.

The **advocate** will be keen to be the spokesperson for a cause; their passion will be deeply embodied but might lack clarity in terms of tangible action that can be taken. Their desire to engage all could seem laboured and they may need help to articulate practical ways of progressing their aims. A future orientation could appear to be nebulous and idealistic although they will be seeking to ensure the systemic impact of all actions is considered. They will value rapport and be looking for encouragement and empowerment to take the lead on driving emotional buy-in.

The ideal solution is of course to encourage these two to work together and, as a leader, when responding to each of these rapport is essential, particularly observation and listening. As exec coaches, we can help through encouraging our clients to ask:

- What is driving the behaviour?
- Are they clear upon which aspects of their approach are helpful and unhelpful?





- Has this person become newly awakened to this cause, or are their efforts more deeply integrated within their lifestyle? In other words, is this a short term 'peak of outrage', as discussed in a previous article in this series?
- Are they fully informed, and is there new information or a new perspective they need to acknowledge or can offer?
- Do they feel they are supported? If not, what is needed?
- What are the skills to develop within them to harness this energy and enable them to achieve progressive outcomes?
- How can the leader help them to take a meta perspective?
- What are the conflicts of agenda here and how can these be navigated?
- How can the leaders encourage coherent and wise decision-making that balances reflection and agency?

The ability to chunk up and down is also key. The activist can become so fixated on a specific thing they fail to see or do not really understand the wider scope, making their efforts inconsistent, whereas the advocate, in stepping forward to represent a cause, can be perceived as seeking personal gain or even inadvertently become 'the personality'. Both and either of these fail to inspire empowered and collective change.

Advocacy, activism and mBIT

The secret lies in having tangible things we can all do whilst truly awakening to how our actions are part of something far bigger – and never trading emphasis of one over the other when BOTH matter.

Here we are, of course, talking about

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integration and alignment – an embodied awareness where modalities such as *mBraining* have relevance in our modelling. We have touched already on metaprograms, intention versus impact, even some loose logical levels questioning – but what insight might the world of *mBIT* offer?

Well... both activism and advocacy start in the heart and are prompted because the individual truly cares.

- Activism is then often (not always) built through a loop of fear and anxiety, with devastating imagery and data together with a sense of urgency – thinking and action can become conditioned and reactive, lacking real creativity. The heart is dialled back in favour of head and gut taking the lead in an aim to be bold and courageous.
- Often with advocacy, because the spokesperson steps forwards others do not realise this is something for us all to lead on. Wonderful and positively emotive imagery is used to remind us all to care, but without clear expectations being set the head and heart loop around and around – and action is left to 'the leaders', whoever they might be. Compassion prevails but the inspirational speeches fail to permeate the gut and translate into personal accountability. Important messages remain less visceral and more akin to passive entertainment than active entrainment.

Neither of the above offer balance.

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So, when it comes to creating influential communication, it appears we are once again seeking to inhabit the middle of a Venn diagram... one where we draw on the best of advocacy and activism. We need both, though there is of course one factor that impacts the ideal distillation/mix – and this is TIME.

With topics such as climate change, we do not have the luxury of time to only advocate. A degree of activism is urgently required:

- **IF** in the process we destroy rapport with those who hold influence over, for instance, our reliance upon fossil fuels, and...
- **IF** we fail to instil love and connection for our ocean and a distinctly visceral awareness of the systemic impact of our choices beyond the here and now...
- **THEN** we fail our planet and future generations.
- **BUT** the choice is ours.
- **WHEN** we choose to both advocate and take action, our collective potential is astounding.

I hope you have found this article useful to reflect upon where you can adjust the dial of advocacy and activism in your world. Feel free to reach out via ANLP's social media platforms to extend these discussions with your comments – the articles in this series are an invitation to a conversation so we can all engage in eco-conscious coaching. ■

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