

a GEN-Y perspective

Social Justice How do we go about it?

There are many things that need “fixing” in this world. From the nice-to-haves, to the dire humanitarian emergencies that we see on the news, such as the Syrian refugee crisis and poverty in the Pacific Islands.

Having dabbled in a few different activist groups in my university years, knowing a lot of people who care deeply about social issues, and having a strong mandate to create long-term social change myself, one of the key things I have learned over the years is the importance of how, as activists, we frame our causes and the messages we communicate to the wider audience.

I must admit to being a bit of a “cause snob” when I was a young-gun, undergraduate student. I touted myself as a good person with strong moral fibre while caring desperately about the state of education in New Zealand, human rights around the globe, and climate change. Admittedly, I was also a little judgemental of those who didn’t care as much “about the cause” as I did.

A few years on, I’d like to think that I have gained a bit of wisdom and compassion. Everyone has worries, whether these be day-to-day stresses or monumental challenges. While this line of reasoning can very easily lead to an excuse for apathy, it is

important to acknowledge that we all experience the world through our own lens, and it is very easy to feel overwhelmed. I always try to keep in mind that “suffering is suffering”. No matter our circumstances or where we live in the world, part of the human experience is to suffer.

One of the key things I have learned over the years is the importance of how, as activists, we frame our causes and the messages we communicate to the wider audience.

In taking this idea of suffering and hardship as an intrinsic part of humanity, there is a strong need to engage people effectively in social action. The key to this is how messages are communicated and emotional connection is established. For example—I was involved in a movement in 2012 protesting the government’s cuts to tertiary education. While the protest was intensive, in my opinion it was not effective in engaging the wider public. The nature of the protests served to demonise the cause by complex messaging, visible anger at the government, and unrealistic demands for free tertiary education in New Zealand. As well, street protests were confused in their intention and direction.

In comparison the youth-led Generation Zero has an organised approach to addressing climate change and shows the power of communicating a cause effectively. Generation Zero uses positive messaging in all its campaigning. It has a really good system for providing critique and alternative plans and drafts for government initiatives. And they do not slag off individual politicians with whom they don’t agree. By having a strong mandate for providing New Zealand with options for cutting carbon pollution, the group is able to steer achievable campaigns. These include more buses on Auckland roads, a congestion-free road network and advocating for a Sky Path over the Auckland Harbour Bridge. The beauty of this approach is that the message is understandable and accessible to the wider public.

The key to engaging people in a cause that will effect positive social change comes down to a few simple ingredients. First, clear, simple messaging is key.

Second, a positive, uplifting and empowering tone is crucial. For example: “We have the opportunity to make an incredible difference to the health of the environment” is more empowering than: “Our generation is practically bleeding carbon and we should all be ashamed of ourselves.”

Third, breaking down the size of a problem to make it more accessible to individuals. Just think—no one person is able to solve hunger in the Sub-Saharan Africa and the sheer size of that problem can paralyse people. However, by framing solutions in bite-sized chunks—such as giving people hope that they could help a family, or provide materials for a village to improve the water supply—we provide an achievable action and give people access to sufficient information.

By employing these basic techniques, we give people the opportunity to grow their passion for what is right in the world and serve to advance the causes that we care about. ■

Louise Carr-Neil is an Auckland native who is passionate about gender equality and human rights. In her spare time she enjoys running and vegetarian cooking.

