

Five Approaches to Social Justice Activism

Increasing Vulnerability for the Activist ...

1. Food, Festivals, & Fun

Activism at this stage is based on cultural events and “celebrating diversity,” usually through cross-cultural programs and activities. Events tend to focus on surface-level cultural awareness, and often actually contribute to the stereotypes they are meant to challenge. People at the Food, Folks, and Fun stage might host an International Fair, a Multicultural Night, or a Diversity Fashion Show. Although these events have the potential to bring people together across difference, they do not have the potential to address injustices such as racism, sexism, classism, or homophobia.

2. Charitable Giving

One way we can contribute to social justice movements is by donating money or other goods to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, United for a Fair Economy, the Humane Society, or even a local food shelf. People often choose this route to activism when they want to do something that will ease their own conscience, but don’t want to associate in any deeper way with a particular cause.

3. Individual Advocacy

An important part of being a social justice activist is building personal relationships with people who are less privileged than you are. People whose activism primarily takes this approach empathize deeply for the ways in which injustices affect people at an individual level—particularly the people with whom they have build personal relationships. However, they are not quite ready (or willing) to risk their own privilege by pushing for systemic change. So they draw on their privilege in smaller ways, serving as an ally or advocate to individual people who are being discriminated against.

4. Service & Volunteerism

Opportunities to work for social justice through service and volunteerism are endless. You can organize a fundraiser for a human rights organization, help build houses for the economically disadvantaged, volunteer at a battered women’s shelter, or get trained to become an anti-homophobia educator. The key point, though, is that you are *actively involved beyond an individual advocacy level*. You are doing the *work* of social justice, not simply supporting that work philosophically. (To clarify, what often passes as “service” is really charitable giving. Service and volunteerism require that we work *with* oppressed communities, avoid the “savior syndrome,” and abolish the hierarchies that remain in place when, for example, wealthy kids are sent into poor neighborhoods to do service-learning, but never discuss how their relative wealth *is connected with* the relative poverty of the people inhabiting those neighborhoods.)

5. Systemic Reform for Social Justice

Activists who see themselves as systemic reformers focus their energies on fighting for larger social change. They might see charitable giving, individual advocacy, and some other approaches to activism as misguided and inconsequential because these approaches fail to address the systemic nature of injustice. So systemic reformers are determined to organize and act on a larger scale in order to change laws, policy, and larger social conditions. They are less interested in educating *about* racism as it exists than with *eliminating* racism; less interested in celebrating diversity than in transforming institutions for equity and justice; less interested in lifting individual people out of poverty than in demanding the eradication of poverty.