On September 17, 2011, Occupy Wall Street took over Zuccotti Park, in the heart of the financial district in Lower Manhattan. Declaring, “We are the 99%,” they captured the attention of the nation. Within a few months, however, the park was cleared and the protesters went home, achieving little, if anything.

In 1998, a similar movement, Otpor, began in Serbia. Yet where Occupy failed, Otpor succeeded marvelously. In just two years they overthrew the reviled Milošević government. Soon after came the Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring in the Middle East.

While Occupy certainly did not lack passion or appeal—indeed its core message about inequality continues to resonate—it was unable to translate that fervor into effective action. Otpor, on the other hand,
created a movement of enormous impact. The contrast is sharp and it is no accident. Successful movements do things that failed ones don’t.

**Clarity of Purpose**

For Otpor, there was never any question about what they were setting out to achieve—the nonviolent overthrow of Slobodan Milošević—and everything they did was focused on that mission. The group also focused on specific pillars upon which the regime’s power rested—such as the media, bureaucracy, police, and military—to target their efforts.

This clarity of purpose led directly to action. For example, rather than focusing on staging large scale demonstrations, in the early stages, Otpor focused on street theatre and pranks to embarrass the regime. When they were arrested, they made a point to be respectful of the police, but also made sure their lawyers and the press knew about their detention.

By starting slow and building scale, Otpor could show, to their own members and the country at large, that they not only had clear goals, but that they were making progress against them. That led others to want to join them, which in turn led to even greater success and more support, resulting in a positive feedback loop.

Compare that to Occupy, which as Joe Nocera noted in a NY Times column, “had plenty of grievances, aimed mainly at the “oppressive” power of corporations,” but “never got beyond their own slogans.” While the group captured attention, nobody, even the protesters themselves, was clear on what was to be done. Before long, everyone lost interest.

**A Genome Of Shared Values**

Otpor developed a clear doctrine. Its principles included a focus on students, unity, tolerance, and nonviolent discipline. Much like a biological genome, these principles provided rules for adaptation that others—in Serbia and around the world—could easily follow and apply even as the facts on the ground evolved and changed.

Rather than a vague set of slogans, the group developed an explicit guide for action. As Tina Rosenberg describes in *Join the Club*, Otpor published a manual, developed training course and brought in activists
from all over Serbia to indoctrinate them. Otpor might have been a protest group, but it operated as if it was a startup company marketing a product.

After Milošević was overthrown, founders of Otpor created CANVAS (Centre for Non Violent Action and Strategies) and the movement spread further. First to the Georgian Republic (Rose Revolution), then to Ukraine (Orange Revolution), then to Egypt (Arab Spring) and beyond. Like Otpor, these groups succeeded in bringing change to their respective countries.

Occupy, on the other hand, had little in the form of organization, structure or doctrine. As Nocera pointed out, “Occupy protesters were purposely — even proudly — rudderless, eschewing leadership in favor of broad, and thus vague, consensus.” Perhaps not surprisingly, they never achieved anything meaningful.

**Effective Planning**

To the outside world, the revolutions that these movements brought about looked spontaneous and chaotic, yet they were anything but. In fact, planning is something that Otpor put an incredible amount of emphasis on in both their training and publications.

The CANVAS training manuals are loaded with advice like “Break down a campaign into small and concrete tasks” and “backward planning forces you to break down a campaign into small, realistic tasks.” It further advises that, “working towards achievable tasks motivates people to complete them.”

As noted above, Otpor’s first actions were small, but they were not haphazard. Even getting arrested served a purpose. Otpor’s polite and respectful attitude toward the police, even as they defied and embarrassed the regime, helped win officers over to their cause.

Coordinated publicity campaigns helped turn even mild provocations into major coups for the opposition.

The purpose of all this was not to “knock out” the pillars of the regime, but to draw them in. Pranks embarrassed the regime, but they were funny and garnered support, even from business leaders, government
bureaucrats, the police and security forces. Where Occupy saw objects vilification for vilification, Otpor saw potential allies for conversion.

In the end, it was the pillars of the regime that actually overthrew Milošević, Otpor was merely a catalyst.

**Connecting To The Mainstream**
For any change to become truly revolutionary, it eventually has to be adopted by the mainstream. That was the crucial difference between Occupy and Otpor. Where Occupy sought to disrupt society, Otpor was determined to embed change within it. While Occupy’s “We are the 99%” rhetoric was engaging, its actions were not.

After change came to Serbia, *Otpor’s movement began anew* with such organizations as, *Kmara* in Georgia, *Pora* in Ukraine and the *April 6th movement* in Egypt, which received advice and training from the group and found similar success. It continues to live on in places as far flung and diverse as Iran, Burma and Zimbabwe, just to name a few.

These are, of course, political movements aimed at creating change in societies as a whole, but the same principles equally apply to *brands, organizations* and even *the healthcare system*. To make change happen, gathering a band of passionate enthusiasts is not enough. You need to make your purpose clear, establish values and create a plan for success.

Most of all, you need to understand that the change you seek will not happen inside the movement, but outside of it. As one of Otpor’s founders *put it*, “Our main goal was to show the general public that the regime could be changed.” When the people of Serbia—including some of those inside the regime—believed in that possibility, they made it a reality.

And that points to *new role for leaders* in the networked age. Today, we can most effectively influence and persuade not through coercion, but by inspiring and empowering belief among those who will be affected.

– Greg