



# Seeking effective strategies for change

If you're reading this, you probably understand that you're alive at a critical point in human history, and indeed for the history of all complex life on Earth. You understand that the current scale of human activity is fundamentally unsustainable, and that industrial levels of energy and resource use are causing a mass extinction and disrupting climatic stability. You also understand that the perpetuation of such an energy-intensive society is inextricably tethered to the extraction and manipulation of finite resources, and that this dependency will ultimately cause the collapse or reorganization of our growth-dependent financial and economic systems.

What is more difficult to understand is how to curtail the destruction caused by these systems. How can we minimize harm to life, both current and future? How can we decrease the metabolism of human society to a sustainable level of throughput while mitigating the humanitarian impact of such a transition?

We don't have clear answers to these questions. No one does, at least not yet. There are a growing number of us who understand the urgency of our time, but this growing number has not been able to change the course of business-as-usual. Massive climate protests and strikes are taking place around the globe, and environmental organizations have never been larger or better funded. However, despite these efforts, the only noticeable abatement in the burning of fossil carbons came from a housing bubble popping in 2008. Clearly, we need additional strategies.

In developing new strategies, we can look to past examples of successful interventions, but an unprecedented predicament requires novel responses. We need to innovate. We need to try things that have never been tried before. We need to be willing to fail and to be able to learn from our failures. In the essay that follows, we'll be discussing strategies that build on existing approaches to activism. We don't claim to know all the answers; what we do know is that humanity's path over the next few decades will affect life for thousands of years to come. That path is not fixed—it will be shaped by many groups and individuals, and we want to further the conversation of how to do so ethically and effectively. Like many of you, we're just beginning adulthood during this incredible inflection point in human history. Thus, this discussion of what to do is not a purely theoretical matter for us, it is a question of what we do with our lives and a question of who we become.

The path towards effective change that we describe is a developmental process with no sequential order—however, our written medium requires we be more linear. We'll begin with an overview of why we think individuals can create large-scale change. Next, we'll discuss the personal questions that are central to finding your own path to making change. In the following section, we'll introduce effectivism, a methodology surrounding the use of leverage in human systems. This methodology is summarized from your authors' discussions with environmental strategist DJ White. We'll introduce some of the key axioms of this approach, and finally, discuss how these principles can be applied by those seeking better futures.

## **Underlying logic**

Our fundamental premise is that individuals and small groups can create intentional changes in any human system, even the largest ones. Before we get into the strategies that can be used to create such change, it's worth taking a deeper look at this fundamental premise. Why should we as individuals

think that we have the power to solve problems so much bigger than ourselves? And if we do have that agency, why is it so difficult to realize? How can groups and individuals begin to develop the capacity for self-directed action? While not a comprehensive answer, the following is some of the reasoning behind our assertion that developing a unique perspective and leveraging that perspective can empower people to create change.

### *Our perspectives can enable or limit our actions*

We as humans tend to go through life seeing reality through a very distorted set of lenses. There's nothing inherently wrong with having some degrees of separation between perception and reality—in fact, this is unavoidable, but there lies potential power in the degree to which we can act with an awareness of our biases and blind spots. While many of these biases and blind spots are evolved, many are cultural, and one of the easiest ways to be mindful of erroneous cultural narratives is to resist consensus trance. Most people unconsciously adopt the assumptions of those around them. Dominant systems, such as jobs and education, train people to think and act in similar ways, with mainly superficial differences. We are trained and indoctrinated to be replaceable workers and consumers, not world-changers. In spite of this mass conformity, everyone has a unique brain, experience, and way of seeing the world. Thus, everyone possesses the aptitude to be usefully different. A unique analysis relying on your own mind and strengths can often have more utility than one formed from cultural norms and consensus. Lean into the strengths of your own mind and trust your own analyses.

Reductionist approaches to understanding the world are the source of many societal blind spots. Our culture rewards specialists who limit the bounds of their analyses. People typically learn the content of the systems they're working in, but do not go past the boundaries outlined in their job descriptions or established fields to learn the patterns that guide those systems. Critically, not many people are looking at the whole picture. Within this fragmented approach to understanding the world, many patterns and processes go unseen. If you approach a system or role in a system with the intention of understanding the entire structure, you will see much more than those who do not look beyond "their" part(s) of the whole. In this way, adopting wide-boundaries of analysis gives you a uniquely valuable "expertise" that many specialist experts lack.

### *There can be structural similarities between outwardly disparate systems*

With a sound understanding of the systems around you, it is possible to develop plans that leverage your impact. It's not about winning by force; structural dynamics can be more important than size, providing potentially high leverage. In other words, fastidiously timed, placed, and executed interventions can have cascading effects of much greater magnitude than the initial inputs. That's a good thing, since in nearly all cases, pro-future advocates will have far less power and resources than the systems they hope to steer. There are generalizable patterns that can be found within outwardly-dissimilar systems, and one can learn to see them. In human systems, almost all structures, such as corporations and nation states, fit into dominant forms of interaction and competition. Learning how to interact with a class of systems is broadly applicable to similar systems.

Although herds of grazing animals and media conglomerates seem like utterly unrelated systems, they both display expectable and learnable "stampede" behavior. Grazing animals can be triggered to stampede by a sufficiently large shock to a few individuals, who then start to run and shock the rest of the herd. Once this group behavior has started, the entire herd is steered by the few individuals in the

front of the pack, who can't stop running due to the pressure of those behind them. Similarly, once a news story is picked up by a few high-profile media outlets, most other outlets will typically follow suit to not be left out, releasing their own article on the story. In both cases, behavior simplifies with group size. Similar dynamics can be found across nearly all groups—corporations, governments, and media being some examples of common structures which simplify human behavior in predictable ways. Critically, just as there are ways to direct herds of animals, there are ways to steer the simplified group behaviors of institutions.

### *Small-scale actors can create large-scale change*

It's obvious that powerful organizations such as governments and transnational corporations can direct change on a large-scale, but with creativity, planning, and an understanding of systems dynamics, even individuals and small groups can have this power (indeed, sometimes they can accomplish things which larger and more overtly powerful entities cannot). Humans evolved to be generalists, to learn, plan, and extrapolate trends into the future. We are able to learn behavioral regularities of systems and have done this instinctively for weather, animals, other humans, and many aspects of our world. The now-dominant reductionist approach to understanding the world and the stratified and specialized social structure that comes along with it are relatively recent phenomena. The processes and institutions of globalized industrial society are oppressive—but not necessarily insurmountable. By understanding the behavior of these standardized processes and institutions, individuals and groups can learn to steer these systems to different states.

### **Beginning with your own mind**

We will begin our discussion of how to engage effectively by suggesting that the first step is one of personal reflection. We recommend asking yourself: *What do I believe about the world? What matters? And who am I?* These are distinct but inseparable questions. Existential meaning is not an objective matter. Ultimately, it's your choice to decide where you find meaning, and this decision is central to who you choose to be as a person. Before you try to affect external systems, it's a good idea to decide for yourself who you are and what you care about. Think over what you stand for, what you stand against, and what, if anything, you would be willing to give your life for. Consider what you want the net effect of you having lived to be. This internal discussion will likely be a continuous, life-long process, deepening as you learn and grow. One of the beautiful things about the human brain is that it is incredibly plastic—the way in which you think and act is constantly being shaped by internal and external factors, and you can guide that process, shaping your brain and behavior to align with your values. We recommend this personal reflection as a precursor to effective action because of the difficulty of blazing one's own trail, and the need for resilience. We are most able to stay motivated when our actions flow directly from a set of convictions that are at the core of who we are.

For those of us who wish to engage with the future, the questions that naturally follow are *what am I to do, and how am I to do it*. Answering what one is to do is a matter of reflecting on “who one is” and “what one cares about” and then making life choices and plans around that. You may not know who you want to be and what you want to do, and that's okay. In fact, we recommend leaning into that discomfort and letting dissonance push you forward towards finding a path through life you'll find fulfilling and deeply meaningful. You have the power to decide what to hold yourself responsible for. There are thousands of species that should be saved and thousands of things in our society that should be changed or protected that won't be realized on our current course. Once you choose what you care

most about or what you think you could be particularly effective at achieving, take personal responsibility for changing that system. Determining how to make that change can be incredibly complex or relatively simple. However, there are some generalizable principles of what works and what doesn't. Those principles will be the focus of the remainder of this essay.

## **Towards effectivism**

For the purpose of this essay, we'll be using the term "effectivism" to refer to the methodology of achieving specific desired changes in human systems. The word is a bit of a tongue-in-cheek reference to activism, which we see as one aspect of effectiveness that can be valuable for building mass mobilization and public approval. We see effectivism as a broader theory of change based on the predictable dynamics of systems and the ways they interact with each other. Not all of these ideas are new—aspects of this theory can be found within various scientific and strategic fields. However, we believe the synthesis of these ideas represents a novel paradigm for finding leverage in systems. Our goal is to outline some of the principles of effectivism, with the hope that they will empower people trying to create pro-future change to do so more effectively.

These ideas and strategies surrounding effectivism were collected and developed by a life-long earth-advocate DJ White. After ten years working in the nascent Greenpeace movement and witnessing the movement turn from a small group of dedicated activists to a globe-spanning corporation, White created other organizations and campaigns designed to improve upon the strategies he had initially utilized as a global Greenpeace campaign director. He has been working for the last several years to distill his experiences with activism into an actionable methodology to assist a next generation of pro-future "effectivists" as well as current-generation activists. Your authors are a few of the young people who have been exposed to White's observations and theories, who hope to continue developing more-effective forms of system intervention. These concepts represent our takeaways from his experiences in change-making.

## **Axioms of Effectivism**

### *Prioritize effectiveness*

This sounds like a truism, but it is the core of the logic of what we describe. Whether your goal is to prevent logging in critical habitat, to secure Indigenous land rights, or to ban a pesticide, you should make the effective achievement of that goal your priority. Most other concerns should not affect your planning process, be they getting publicity, bringing in enough revenue to grow your organization, or making your mother proud. Of course, achieving a goal may have positive externalities for your organization or for you as an individual. If your plan relies on public support of an issue, you may need to drum up publicity, and if you're taking action to protect the things you care about, your mom will probably be very proud. The point is to be mindful of what actually serves your chosen goal. For example, is it better served by you being famous, anonymous, or somewhere in between? We recommend adopting the mindset that, ultimately, it's not about you—it's about the impacts your actions have.

### *Plan around stable states*

For our purposes, a stable state is defined as a system state that is resilient to external forces and maintains its structure, inputs, and outputs on the time scale that is being considered. This doesn't

imply that the situation itself is calm—the sun has been in a stable state for many billions of years despite being a giant percolating fusion explosion. When planning interventions, the goal should be to shift the target system to a specific alternate stable state. This state has to be developed not from one’s idealized version of the target system, but from an understanding of how the system will respond to a series of controlled interventions. An intervention can temporarily succeed, but if the system remains in flux, it may collapse to the previous stable state. Take the example of the many political revolutions that succeed in removing a corrupt leader from power, only to see the opening filled by another member of the same corrupt administration. This failure to bring about regime change is a failure to move the system into a new stable state. The period of time that a system is unstable is a small and critical window when a “state change” is possible.

### *Predict how systems will respond and prepare accordingly*

For state change to happen, you need to determine what it will take to push the system out of its current state of stability. Stable systems are stable because they successfully accommodate the challenges they encounter, using responses based on challenges they faced in the past. They only innovate when they must and evolve to respond to issues as efficiently as possible. Defenses will not develop with much of a buffer, because excess defenses would be an unnecessary drain on resources. There is a finite amount of energy that can be used to adapt to threats, which in most human institutions, is measured in dollars (but the relevant resource could be public opinion, oil, or bullets). This means that dispersed, minor, or expected disturbances are unlikely to overwhelm the defenses of a well-adapted system. Rather, to push such a system out of a stable state typically requires either sudden high pressure or a novel challenge.

To help make this more concrete, we’ll discuss these dynamics in the context of an NGO researching the harmful practices of a company and planning an exposé. Longstanding corporations rely, at least to an extent, on public approval. Thus, they have well developed mechanisms to respond to public image issues, such as CEO misbehavior or maltreatment of employees. These responses typically include the rapid deployment of media representatives and internal memos on how to talk to journalists. To change the company’s practices, the NGO would need to overwhelm the company’s planned defenses by taking into account its past responses to challenges: what deleterious information had previously been released and how negative the media response was, what legal strategies the company used and how quickly it brought in lawyers, what public relations tactics were utilized and how much money the administration was willing to spend. The information released by the NGO would have to be stronger than anything the corporation is prepared for in order to force the corporation to negotiate or change its practices.

### *Consider timing*

The best way to ensure that a new stable state is achieved is to plan for the new state and to reach it quickly. If the NGO from the previous example posts each piece of evidence on its website as soon as it’s uncovered, the company will likely be able to build up its responses to the campaign through public relations or similar tactics, and the shock value of the news story will fade. While the campaign might drain some of the company’s resources, the company will likely be able to protect itself from major damages and could continue its practices. However, if the NGO keeps quiet about its findings until it uncovers an overwhelming amount of evidence, and then publicizes that evidence all at once as part of an exposé, the company will not have a chance to build up its defenses. Releasing the information all at

once is more likely to create a disturbance on a scale that the company isn't prepared for and won't leave the company time to respond.

It's almost always best to wait for optimal timing to begin an intervention. For example, if the described NGO is collecting evidence on a harmful chemical, it should release the findings immediately before a decision is made regarding the chemical's use, such as a corporate board vote, court case, or legislative session. If there is no planned deliberation of the chemical's use, the NGO could begin by addressing the company's executive board, notifying them that the evidence will be released if the company doesn't change its practices within a given timeline. Giving the company a short timeline in which to make a decision simplifies its potential responses and increases the chance that it will accept the NGO's proposal.

Another reason why speed is important is that executing plans quickly minimizes the time that your target systems are vulnerable to chaotic effects. The world is full of chaotic systems that are truly unpredictable—weather, daily stock market movement, seismic activity, etc, and these all have a bearing on and interactions with your target system. The main way to keep events from quickly diverging from your predictions is to carry out the active, public stages of your plan as quickly as possible, before larger and more powerful entities can respond with force, and before the random dance of unexpected accidents (i.e. reality) makes your predictions moot.

### *Control information flows*

Another lesson that can be drawn from the corporate example is the importance of controlling flows of information. It is almost always more powerful for information to be kept quiet and used in directed ways, rather than for information to be publicized as soon as it's discovered. Don't broadcast new information immediately; create a plan to leverage the information instead. For plans that rely on highly intentional releases of information, that information must be kept secure prior to this release (exposés are a good example of this but certainly not the only one). The best way to do this is to keep any sensitive information on a need-to-know basis until its planned release. Now that most documentation and communication is done digitally, there are additional dimensions to information security. While these dimensions are outside of the scope of this essay, we recommend being mindful of them.

### *Create a stepwise plan*

For most if not all campaigns, you should be able to break your plan into a series of discrete steps that will take you from the present to your desired end-state. You should estimate the probability of each step working, and calculate the aggregate probability of success based on these predictions. If even a single step has only a 50% chance of working, the overall odds of your plan's success plummet—which means you either need to rethink the individual step, or reorganize your plan so it's not contingent on that step. Challenge your plan continuously before moving forward. Imagine what could go wrong and what you might not have thought of. After going through this process dozens, or even hundreds of times, you'll improve your plan or reach a new and better one. Another aspect of this is to make your targeted outcomes specific and measurable, so you can clearly see how successful your plan was. This not only makes for a stronger plan, it will also improve your predictive abilities. Furthermore, directing your energy towards concrete outcomes rather than vague, and possibly unattainable goals, will prevent burnout.

Most effectivist interventions will consist of two distinct phases. The first consists of analysis, planning, and preparation. This phase may only require the planning of an individual or small group and should involve a high control of information flow. This process is not unlike lining up dominoes, poised to fall—you'll want to have all the pieces in place before you knock one over. Once you're sure all the pieces are in place, you can begin the second phase—setting the pieces in motion. In most cases, the planning process will take much more time than the “active phase” of the intervention.

## **Cultivating an effectivist mindset**

### *Directing your learning*

Once you work out your ethics and which systems you feel the strongest need to affect, your possible moves forward will start to simplify. Make bold steps in the general direction of what you want to accomplish, and avoid getting wrapped up in systems or commitments that prevent you from being effective. The process of moving into the unknown often seems subjectively long and highly uncomfortable, but you'll likely establish a path relatively quickly.

Choosing when and how to intervene requires information, so put yourself out there. Find out which information flows are relevant to your interests or mission and find ways to tap into them. Learn how behavior happens at different levels within human systems, and learn to see how responses generally simplify as group size increases. Don't simply observe—analyze your observations and make predictions. An essential prerequisite for the effective action we describe is to calibrate your abstract predictive abilities, which means testing and continually improving upon how well the models in your mind reflect the functioning of the real-world systems you hope to affect. It entails being able to put together increasingly complex sets of “if-then” statements to predict how your target system will respond to potential interventions.

Whether you're thinking through things on your own or talking them through with others, try getting out of your usual societal contexts. This could mean creating time and space outside of your day-to-day routines, families, friends, or other social structures. Gaining a functional understanding of the world will likely involve taking your learning into your own hands. You can't steer the human enterprise away from business-as-usual by simply following an existing job description or college major.

This isn't meant to discourage you from going to school or getting a job, only to caution against relying on institutional career tracks for finding your path in the world. It may be necessary, and even be very useful, to take a job doing something which seems nothing like what you want to accomplish. Moreover, jobs can be an opportunity to insert yourself into the systems you want to affect. Consider looking for job openings within the organizations or industries you're interested in, or offering to volunteer if there are no entry points—you may create a position for yourself by being indispensable. There will almost always be a way into a system, it just might not be a way which obviously already exists.

### *Choosing projects*

First and foremost, choosing the projects you ultimately want to work toward should be a deeply personal question of what you feel is most important. Bring a strong ethical grounding to your intended interventions, as techniques and strategies provide no intrinsic moral direction. Prioritize projects carefully based on the societal context of the issues; consider what problems will tend to resolve on

their own with peak energy, and what things might only be possible to accomplish while human activity is still growing. You will likely develop a logical “triage” of interventions: issues which can no longer be changed, those which will likely be okay regardless of what happens, and those which will only be achieved with a well-planned intervention. The last category is where you’ll want to direct your focus.

Don’t be afraid of failure, but be aware of the consequences of failing, and let that inform the time and care you put into your analysis and planning. When beginning to develop the skills we describe, avoid projects that could make future interventions more difficult if you don’t initially succeed. Just as forests that haven’t burned are more susceptible to major fires, relatively unknown and unpublicized systems often have more potential for leverage. Typically, the more popular and highly publicized an issue is, the harder it becomes to push that system out of a stable state. Bringing an unknown issue to attention with an ill-advised campaign could make it harder to solve, so take special consideration before taking on such issues. This represents a fine line to walk while starting—aim high enough that you are getting the experience you need, but don’t test yourself in any critical systems before you are aware of your skills and limitations.

### *Finding your place within a community of change-makers*

Most complex interventions will require a team or community of people. The numerous decisions that go into a stepwise plan will be best handled by a team that is small enough to fully understand and discuss all possibilities. Teams are most successful when members work on aspects of the intervention that are matched with their individual skill sets. We all have unique perspectives and strengths and can contribute to the success of a team in different ways. One person may be adept at talking to politicians, another a skilled planner, and another a graphic designer that creates powerful visuals for a campaign. There also may be members of the community who are not directly involved with the plan but who contribute resources and support. All of these roles are vital.

Should you organize a campaign using the methodology described, you’ll find it easier than you might think to find highly motivated people with the skills you need, who want to contribute to the campaign even if there is no financial compensation. The world of paid jobs is distinctly lacking in the ability to give deep meaning, individual agency, and opportunities to make lasting positive change. By developing plans that exist outside of these structures and empower those involved, you will likely find people eager to help accomplish your shared mission with a level of dedication and excitement absent from conventional workplaces.

Beyond the immediate necessity of team members for a specific plan, it can be highly useful to have a small core of fellow generalists to discuss and work on plans with—and more so than just the utility of planning, it can be deeply fulfilling to find a community of people who share your values and will support you on your journey. You’re not alone in the love, fear, and urgency you feel for the future of life and in your desire to protect it. We can create communities that share this mission and collaborate to pursue it more effectively.

### *Staying motivated*

The process of learning to engage effectively is not a linear one. Rather it will be continuous and iterative as you learn through experimentation. This is an intense and sometimes painful process of trial and error. You are blazing a unique path, and this necessarily includes failure. You’ll be pushing the edge of what is possible, and failing repeatedly, particularly at first. Don’t be discouraged by failure,

but readjust your mental models to make sure you don't fail in the same way twice, and try again. Don't give up. Learn to care for yourself and give your brain what it needs to continue productively—staying motivated and healthy is more important than asceticism or perfection. Most activists burn out just as they start getting good at what they do. The scale and complexity of the predicaments we face means that, like any complex skill-set or career, it may take you years to get really good at doing what you do. No one expects an engineer to design and build a bridge after a year of training, and the issues which most need effective action are at least as complex.

## **Conclusion**

Your mind is powerful, and you can learn to leverage that power. You can utilize your predictive abilities, imagination, and unique perspective to create positive changes in the world. Due to the level of globalization and interconnection of our societies, the potential ability of an individual human to affect the existence of their species, and of all life on the planet, has never been greater. While cultural norms suggest that individuals and small groups have little ability to make change, and that change comes from large organizations and institutions; this does not have to be the case. Through an awareness of systems dynamics and careful planning, one can accomplish more than most consider possible. We are entering a time when our societies will be facing energetic limits, and large-scale change and societal reorganization is certain. What is not certain is the direction that this change will take: we live within the most complex nexus of systems in the known universe, full of chaotic process, amoral corporations, illusory egalitarianism, and individuals seeking short-term gain through any means available. It is more important than ever for those of us who are motivated by a love for humans and our non-human kin to direct change. We encourage all those following an ethical concern for the future well-being of life to act and to do so with great care and intention. We hope that the strategies we have discussed here will help guide those actions towards a better future.

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