



STUDENTS FOR LIBERTY

A Theory of Empowerment

By Alexander McCobin

There are many young individuals passionate about liberty and filled with a burning desire to fight for a freer world who will come up and ask “How can I help?” This question is understandable, but, that question is one of the greatest problems facing the cause of liberty today. The only answer that holds promise for creating a substantive movement for liberty and effecting change in the world is, “The best way for you to help is to learn how to not ask that question again. When you move beyond asking others how you can help, then you are able to really help.”

This is likely a challenge to everything you have been taught. The common experience of youth is to take orders and follow rules. The world is an imposing place full of constraints and directions given by others. Learning to please others and excel at the tasks given to you by others is the highest mark of achievement. There is no creation, only navigation. For SFL, in contrast, the world is a construction that results from the interactions of both the individual and the people around her. SFL is founded on the premise that students can take ownership of their lives and their world, and through their own effort, make the world a different place.

You can create the world. You not only can influence it, but you can literally construct the world around you. There is no standard for success naturally determined by society. You get to set the standard for what success means and determine how to get there. SFL as an organization does set standards that are used to evaluate individual SFL leaders, but these standards are dedicated to a certain purpose that individuals accept and can reject. These are standards established by the SFL leadership members themselves based on a realistic determination of what we, as an organization, have determined constitute success in promoting liberty. However, if you do not accept the goals of SFL, you do not have to be part of the leadership. SFL even provides the resources and support for new organizations and initiatives to be created that establish new goals and metrics of evaluation. To the extent that you are part of SFL’s leadership, you accept the methods of evaluating leadership, or you offer solutions to reform methods of evaluation.

The typical feeling of subordination is exacerbated by the typical education system and lifestyle imposed on youth. When you are young, you are taught how to follow the rules laid down by others. You are rewarded for doing as told and conforming to the expectations set by people who came before you. The typical course set for the high-achieving high school student is to get good grades on exams given by teachers, participate in activities organized by teachers and parents, and continue on an educational path that society has nearly deemed the only acceptable option for any self-respecting individual (i.e. college). By the time that young people graduate college and enter “the real world,” they are so indoctrinated by the idea that there is a hierarchical structure given by others for how they ought to evaluate success, that one of three things happens: (1) They seek out definitions of success either in terms of wealth accumulation, fame, or some other externally defined metric. (2) They experience an



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identity crisis by which they lose sense of what success means entirely. (3) They learn how to construct their own standard of success.¹

If someone tells you, “It can’t be done,” don’t just take them on their word. Ask, “Why not?” Many times, their only response will be “Because no one has done it before.” This is no reason for why you can’t accomplish it. When a hurdle is placed in front of you, don’t stop. Find a way around it. Only in rare circumstances is there actually no way to accomplish your goal. It will likely take hard work, creativity, and time, but there is always a way to achieve your goal.

The key is to focus on the goal and not the means of reaching that goal. Don’t be set on holding a conference in a particular room. Be flexible to find other locations. Your end shouldn’t change, but the way you reach that end can and should change as the situation changes.

This is a call for freedom fighters not to be simple foot soldiers, but to use their minds. Only when those who care about liberty are able to craft their own strategies for advancing freedom and bring new perspectives and intellectual ammunition to the battlefield can they be meaningful participants.

This does not mean that you should become arrogant and tell everyone else what to do. Moving beyond the question of “how?” does not mean you get to tell others *how they* should support liberty. If you stop asking “how?” and instead start telling others, “here’s how you need to do it”, then you’ve missed the point. There is no blueprint or silver bullet for creating a free society. Nor is there a single strategy that will take care of everything or a single person who can carry the burden entirely on her shoulders. We need more people to develop and implement new strategies.

It may be easier to explain this as a contrast to what I do *not* mean. The first alternative that this theory of empowerment rejects is incompetence. Typically, older individuals believe that young people don’t have the skill, experience, seriousness, or professionalism to make a difference in the world. All too often, older individuals assume that youth are incapable of changing the world simply because they have no skills or experience to do so. In fact, this is a standard perspective of youth in internships. The default in organizations is for interns to wait for someone to tell them what to do. If a problem arises, the manager must come in to make a decision about what to do. In SFL, we care most about solving the problem. Each individual is empowered to find a solution within the confines of the rules of the organization and the guidelines of the situation.

A second alternative that empowerment rejects is paternalism. Under this theory, students are seen as being able to make a difference, but only when they are given directives by others, when they are pieces of a larger structure to be developed and maneuvered by leadership at the top of the organization for particular ends. Students are expected to follow a strict set of instructions for a strict purpose. To that end, they are replaceable. No individual’s function is unique. The role of the individual is to carry out the instructions of those at top, and so any person is capable of taking their place so long as they carry out the instructions. This structure assumes a particular goal and a definitive

¹ This is not a critique of child-rearing in general. It is that childhood and adulthood are different. Successfully transitioning this is critical to one’s ability to interact with the world.



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means of reaching that goal. Vaclav Havel, a Czech dissident under USSR rule described the means by which paternalistic authority utilized ideology to maintain its hold over people:

Ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them. As the repository of something suprapersonal and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious modus vivendi, both from the world and from themselves. It is a very pragmatic but, at the same time, an apparently dignified way of legitimizing what is above, below, and on either side. It is directed toward people and toward God. It is a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo. It is an excuse that everyone can use, from the greengrocer, who conceals his fear of losing his job behind an alleged interest in the unification of the workers of the world, to the highest functionary, whose interest in staying in power can be cloaked in phrases about service to the working class. The primary excusatory function of ideology, therefore, is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe.²

An imposed order that directs how people behave and to what particular end they work is unsustainable in the pursuit of liberty. First and foremost, we don't know what the end goal of a pro-liberty society will exactly look like. We may be able to expound on certain principles and policies, but the specific formulation of how a pro-liberty society will function is unclear. That is what makes it unique. It is not driven by philosophers or economists saying "this is it". It is about allowing people to create the world around them without being forced by others into an unjust world. Second, even if we did know the end goal, we wouldn't have a clear mechanism for getting there. There are many strategies for promoting liberty today. It is wrong to say that every individual ought to adopt the same strategy. Each person should to adopt the strategy they can produce the most liberty with so that the liberty movement, as a whole, includes a diversity of efforts by many individuals. Third, the means of achieving the end is not so cut and dry as to allow people to be replaced. SFL's success relies on unique individuals providing unique skill sets and providing unique perspectives to the organization's expansion. Though SFL leaders eventually move on, the direction of SFL is intimately tied to the direction given by its current and future leadership.

Given that SFL seeks to empower individuals, there may be some confusion about SFL's stance when it comes to pride and humility. SFL's leaders should be proud to be part of SFL and their work for liberty. However, they must embrace humility as well. They must be humble enough to recognize their failings and areas in need of improvement. The goal at all times is honesty. False pride and false humility are undesirable. If the honest evaluation of an individual's work is that she deserves praise, then we will praise her. If the honest evaluation of an individual's work is that she has not succeeded,

² Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 1978, available at: <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165havel.html>.



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then she will not be praised. Pride is an important element of empowerment, but only if there is good reason to be proud.

To fully empower yourself, you must understand the relationship between yourself and others. The value of working with others is threefold. First, by working with others you can increase your impact because more people are working on the project. Second, the interaction with others allows ideas to be challenged and developed in ways unparalleled by an individual's thought processes so they become stronger. Third, working with others requires those opposed to liberty to recognize the pro-liberty position and engage it.

The best way to advance the cause of liberty is to use these suggestions to empower other students. After all, SFL is premised entirely on the principle that students can change the world if they effectively engage with and inspire others!

This theory of empowerment is tangibly represented in SFL's strategy for working with students. SFL's mechanisms of supporting pro-liberty students can be grouped into three categories:

1. Training – SFL provides handbooks, webinars, workshops, and leadership programs for students to learn best practices and gain hands-on experience in leadership.
2. Resourcing – SFL provides books, webinars, conferences, speakers networks, and other resources to help students promote liberty on their campus.
3. Networking – SFL connects students with other students and opportunities available to them offered by other organizations dedicated to liberty.

Simply put, SFL's strategy is to empower students to be effective advocates of liberty in whatever way they want to promote liberty. We do not want to try to fit students into a particular category or impose a particular avenue of action on them. Rather, the best advocates of liberty are those who combine their personal passions with their defense of liberty. Our job is to help students identify their personal strengths and develop their ability to promote liberty in that area. If students are interested in ideas, we want to help them educate their peers and develop their own ideas for liberty. If students are interested in activism, we want to help them hold protests. Instead of telling students "this is the only way to promote liberty" we want to tell them, "There are many ways to promote liberty. The best way you can promote liberty is by doing what you are best at and most interested in, so do that."

This applies to the career interests of SFL members as well. We want to develop leaders of liberty at all levels, in all fields. We don't even want to ask that students work full time for the cause of liberty. What is important is that individuals make liberty one of their life projects. The more there are advocates of liberty in a diversity of fields, the stronger the movement will be. We want to prepare students to be strong academics to develop the intellectual foundations of the movement. We want to give young journalists the experience to go on and advance the message of liberty through new and old media. We want SFL members to become successful businesspeople so prominent community members espouse liberty and donate back to the movement. If individuals want to work in politics, they should develop leadership skills while young. And of course, the more human capital we can provide the nonprofit liberty movement, the better.

This also applies to how SFL works with student groups: We empower them to advance liberty. We don't control them from the top-down by giving them directives. Nor do we treat them as though



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they are entirely dependent on SFL's main office for purpose or existence. We do not provide financial support in part to ensure that groups remain independent and self-directed rather than being held accountable to and reacting solely to the national office. The way SFL does support groups is primarily by providing a forum where student leaders can meet one another and share their experiences. SFL Conferences are places to meet other students, featuring workshops on student organizing run by students. Local coalitions of student groups are meant to encourage discussion and collaboration between leaders who may otherwise not communicate. Resources such as the E-Leadership series, leadership handbooks, free books, and other tangible products are offered to students, they are primarily created and distributed by student leaders on SFL's Executive Board and Campus Coordinator Program. SFL provides oversight and support for groups. SFL does not dictate how a group must function.

Because SFL does not have a chapter model, we can work with a diversity of pro-liberty groups. Whether they are as Students For Liberty, College Libertarians, Young Americans for Liberty, Campus Objectivists, Austrian Economists or issue-specific advocacy groups such as Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, we support them because our strategy relies upon bottom-up empowerment rather than top-down assimilation. There are many issues and many philosophies that comprise the liberty movement. SFL exists to serve students interested in those issues and philosophies across the spectrum to build the liberty movement *as a whole*.

Asking the question, "How can I help?" is a good thing. It expresses an interest in liberty and a desire to effect change. But on its own, it's not enough. If the person asking that really means "I am ready to contribute the following ideas and creative skills depending on what the status and needs of the organization are" then it may actually be valuable because it represents a proactive inquiry into the organization and the individual herself. However, if its meaning is, "Just tell me what to do," then the individual is merely looking to take orders and add little intellectual effort into the project. The goal of empowerment is to get students to use their intellectual abilities for liberty. As an SFL leader, you will be trained and expected to do just that, and your job will be to work with other students to do the same.