

Context for this web site and essay: I (Bruce) have been an employee at Google since 2005. The “Stepping Up Our Game” essay below is my effort to contribute to the continued strengthening of the [worker-driven Google reform movement](#). Although the primary target audience is Alphabet workers, the essay also includes content that speaks to people who aren't at Alphabet at all, and in general it recommends an insider-plus-outsider approach to reforming the company.

A [PDF version of the essay](#) is also available.

The [alphabetworkers.org](#) website itself is a proof-of-concept for an organization that would advocate for pro-worker and pro-stakeholder changes in Alphabet's business practices. The organization doesn't presently exist, but it could, if the reform movement chooses to bring it into existence. See section 3 of the essay for some discussion of what such an organization could look like.

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- Bruce

Stepping Up our Game: Strategic Recommendations to Strengthen the Google Reform Movement

November 1, 2019

Bruce Hahne

“Google is good. Google is fallen. Google must be redeemed.”

- [Walter Wink](#) ([paraphrased](#))

Introduction

Exactly one year ago today, the struggle for the soul of Google burst into public view. Angered by a recurring pattern of mistreatment of women and the glad-handing of their oppressors, tens of thousands of Google workers [walked off the job to join mass on-campus protests](#) sharing their stories of mistreatment by a company which has lost its ethical bearings. As Fortune reporter Beth Kowitt [noted earlier this year](#), the walkouts and their demands are just one piece of a larger reform movement, one that seeks to push Google away from its [growing embrace of militarism and military contracts](#), its use of tens of thousands of [vendor and contract workers](#) who are regularly [treated as second-class](#), its closed-door decision-making by elites, and its growing insistence on chasing profitability regardless of who gets hurt along the way.

Yet today, 12 months after the walkout, internal frustration has started to set in. The firm has neither agreed to nor implemented the majority of the November 2018 [walkout demands](#). Patterns of oppression continue unabated, with Google [attempting to install a former Senior VP of a hate group](#) onto its “AI advisory council” in March 2019, [accused of retaliation](#) against two key walkout organizers in April, [refusing to remove homophobic Youtube content](#) in June, [offering cloud services to U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#) in August -- that's the “[we put kids in cages](#)” organization -- and [attempting to shut down a labor union talk](#) in October. We're seeing roughly one major horrific incident every other month at the moment, with no indications that Google has any sincere intentions of changing its behavior. The question that the Google reform movement naturally asks itself is: why is this so? Why is there no change?

The answer is that the reform movement hasn't yet built the organizational capacity, institutions, and alliances needed to put continuous, increasing, and sometimes painful pressure on the firm to force it to change. We're not in the endgame of a social change movement, we're still early. The long-term social change timeline that I like to use is the eight-phase "Movement Action Plan" (MAP) by Quaker activist Bill Moyer, available online in its [original 1987 broadsheet version](#), and in extended form as [Doing Democracy](#) from New Society Publishers. I've put Moyer's summary of the eight stages and their key attributes into the figure below, along with my thoughts about where the Google reform movement currently sits with respect to its long-term goals.

One aspect of the MAP social change model that wasn't true when Moyer wrote it is that large one-shot "dramatic nonviolent actions" are now much easier to publicize and organize than they were in 1987, which means that they take place earlier on the timeline, no longer just in phase 4. The ease of calling single large-scale protest actions has deceived many modern activists into thinking that they're close to success, when actually their movements don't yet have sufficient roots to thrive or sustain the struggle. A 2014 article in The Atlantic went to extremes in asserting "[Why Street Protests Don't Work](#)" -- but the problem isn't that they don't work, it's that they're insufficient, and no substitute for the long, hard, often-invisible work of organizing people and winning hearts and minds.

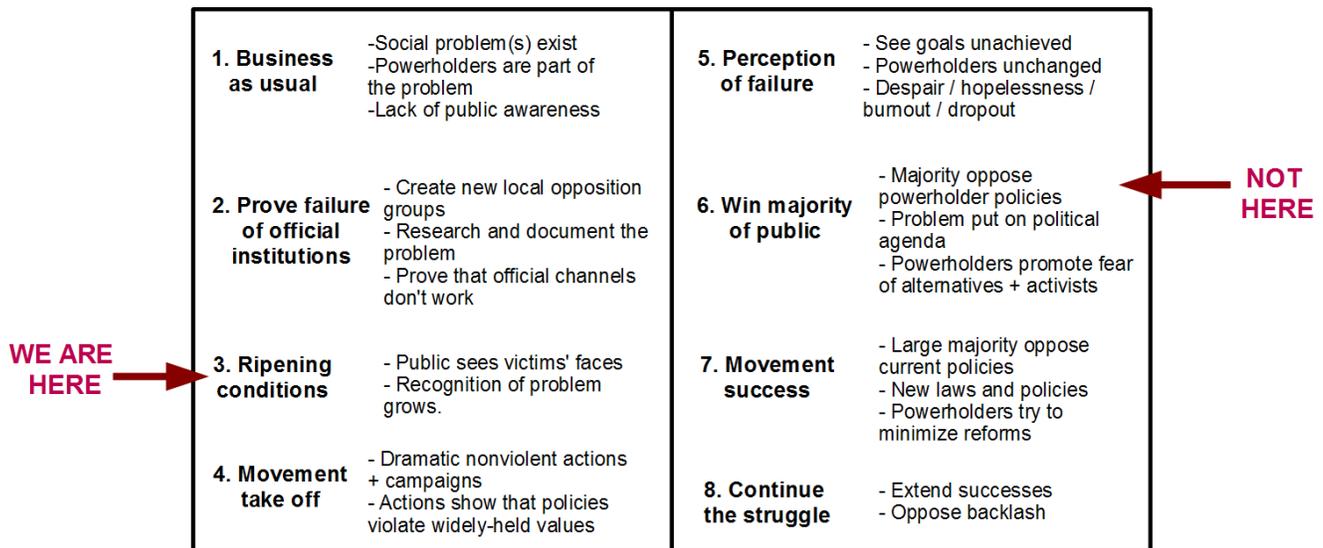


Figure 1: Eight stages of social movements, by Bill Moyer
The Google reform movement is probably closer to stage 3 than to stage 6.

In the spirit of helping the Google reform movement continue to gain strength, below I offer ten strategic recommendations that can build capacity, build movement strength, and win more hearts and minds to support the substantial efforts that will be necessary to achieve the movement's broader goals.

1. Change the framing: Google is a “rogue machine” or a “sick patient”, it's not “family”

“Look Dave, I can see you're really upset about this. I honestly think you ought to sit down calmly, take a stress pill, and think things over.” - Hal 9000 recommends civility, right after murdering most of the crew.

The metaphors that we use to describe the world have a powerful impact on the decisions that our brains

allow us to make. We need to begin speaking of Google as a “rogue machine” in need of our repair, or a “sick patient” in need of a cure, rather than thinking of the corporate entity as “family”, with all of the loyalty and behavioral constraints that this framing invokes.

“Family” is a powerful metaphor, and one that corporations often promote with their employees because it helps make people behave. A “family” framing invokes principles like loyalty and fidelity, phrases like “let’s keep this within the family” and “it’s our family secret”, and a parent-child hierarchy in which the employer is the loving, resource-giving parent and the employee is the child, expected to obey and express gratitude to the parent. An ongoing task of the Google reform movement is to reject this framing. If we don’t free ourselves from this metaphor, it won’t be possible to achieve any other goals.

I propose the alternate metaphors of “rogue machine” or “sick patient”. A rogue machine is a device originally created for good, but whose psyche has turned corrupt and destructive. A rogue machine is [HAL 9000](#), created to serve humans but who turns on them, first lying and eventually killing crewmembers. For fans of now-classic video games, a rogue machine is [GLaDOS](#) from Portal, who uses a wide variety of manipulation tactics including cajoling, bargaining, lying, shaming, gaslighting, and eventually, violence against the player protagonist. You don’t treat a rogue machine like family – instead, you come up with a plan, you disable or dismantle the dysfunctional parts of the machine, and you seek to reprogram the machine to serve its original purpose, which is to serve human well-being. If a rogue machine is harming people, you don’t “keep it within the family”, you yell “shut it down!” and you encourage as many people to help in the shutdown process as possible. You don’t exist to serve the machine – the machine exists to serve human beings. We are its creators, and we get to tell it how to behave.

Alternately, a “sick patient” framing works nearly as well. A sick patient, for this metaphor, is someone with one or more malignant, toxic, unwanted elements causing harm to their body and preventing them from fully functioning. Our task as healers who support the patient is to determine the nature of the toxicity, then put the patient onto a healing program that removes the toxin and restores the body to wholeness. Sometimes healing requires surgery, and surgery can hurt. Some types of healing can require removing entire organs that have become too diseased, or too dysfunctional, to be allowed to stay in the body. The metaphor isn’t perfect since in most cases, a sick patient understands that they’re sick and wants to undergo treatment, while a sick corporation typically denies its sickness and ferociously resists treatment. So feel free to choose the metaphor that you like, but get rid of “family”.

As we reset our metaphors, we need to be clear to distinguish between Google, the corporate entity, versus the individual workers who are part of, yet distinct from, Google-as-system. When we hear somebody say “Google is like a sick patient”, our individualism can often provoke us to respond: “I’m not sick!” And that’s true - as individuals we may not be, not in the way that the corporate body is sick. As human beings, of necessity we live, we exist, we work within toxic systems, and those systems can cause harm even when we as individuals don’t intend any harm. Our challenge, then, is to recognize toxic systems and patterns of harm, refuse to cooperate with them even when we might benefit, and continue to struggle against them.

2. Open the movement to external participants, and grow it aggressively

Any movement that seeks to challenge and reform the behavior of a Fortune 50 corporation must of necessity be large, and it can’t exist solely within the firm itself. Despite the occasional articles that we see cheerleading for Google workers standing up for what’s right, the corporation simply has too much power to harass, intimidate, investigate, retaliate, scare people into silence, block promotions, or simply to

ignore reform activism from its employees and vendors/contractors, if that activism isn't part of a much broader movement.

As I've suggested in the [sister document](#) that accompanies this essay, Google should be a stakeholder-driven firm, not a shareholder-driven firm, and similarly the Google reform movement can and should enlarge to include all stakeholders, which means potentially every human being on the planet. Success will require opening movement participation and communication to non-employees, as well as the creation of relationships with nonprofits, NGOs, and activist organizations. We'll need to see open cross-movement conversations with [Microsoft Workers for Good](#), [Amazon Employees for Climate Justice](#), [Tech Workers Coalition](#), organized labor, human rights organizations such as [Amnesty International](#), legal support organizations such as the [National Women's Law Center](#) and the [Times Up Legal Defense Fund](#), Youtube hate speech watchdog [Sleeping Giants](#), the Mozilla Foundation's [Youtube Regrets initiative](#), and more.

Cross-organizational collaboration to date suggests limited connection at best: Amnesty International initiated a "[drop Dragonfly](#)" campaign on its own, and Bay Area housing justice organization [Silicon Valley Rising](#) independently organized a [rally at the 2019 Alphabet shareholder's meeting](#). More recently, the big success news of September 2019 was the announcement that 80 Google contract workers in Pittsburgh had worked in coordination with the Pittsburgh Association of Technical Professionals (PATP), a project of the United Steelworkers, to [successfully vote to unionize](#). We'll need to improve on these efforts and build strength by aligning both with other organizations, and with thousands of supporters who don't work for Google at all.

Movement organizing and cross-group collaboration requires money, people, time, and one or more formal structures to bring them together... which leads us to the next recommendation.

3. Create one or more institutions to unify, brand, fundraise for, and give voice to the movement

The Google reform movement is rapidly approaching the limit of what can be done using only small, unfunded groups of employees who may have a few spare hours each week to organize a petition drive, speaking event, or the occasional rally. While the "small, unstructured, scrappy, seat of our pants" early-phase movement structure has a strong romantic appeal to some activists, this approach doesn't allow a change movement to build sufficient political power to bring about lasting change, and it limits a movement in a wide variety of ways.

As the next step in its natural evolution towards strength, the Google reform movement should establish an external advocacy organization, incorporated in the U.S. as a 501c non-profit organization, to advocate for major pro-worker and pro-stakeholder changes in Alphabet's business practices, shed light on and speak against Alphabet's ethical failures, and promote legislative and public policy changes that reduce Alphabet's capacity to cause harm. The organization would have a board of directors drawn primarily or exclusively from current and former Alphabet workers, would allow anyone on the planet to join as a dues-paying member, would hold its business and public meetings outside of Google, and would be entirely independent of Google management control. The organization would not be a labor union in the U.S. legal sense of the term, but would have the ability to provide consulting and support to groups within Alphabet seeking to unionize.

Creating this type of organization would entail a significant amount of work, but the benefits would also be significant:

- It creates a unified brand for the movement: logo, web site, social media, email addresses.

- It establishes a go-to point of contact for journalists seeking to interview somebody who can represent the Google reform movement, or who need a quote from Google rank and file workers.
- It creates an organization that can fundraise and hire staff.
- The organization will be able to hire one or more field organizers to support local Google reform groups, and to facilitate communication and strategic planning with non-Google organizations.
- It creates an organization that can establish its own separate membership email list, and send its own newsletters and updates to that list, independent of Google control.
- It allows people who aren't Alphabet workers to contribute to the reform movement, both financially and with their volunteer time.
- It creates a trusted outside organization that can anonymize Alphabet worker stories and present them publicly, minimizing the possibility of retaliation.
- The organization can launch projects to provide much-needed support services, such as know-your-workplace-rights training and a legal referral program.
- It creates an organization that can advocate, with a unified voice, for new laws.
- The organization, once it builds sufficient brand credibility, might receive opportunities to testify on behalf of state and national legislation.

This operating structure would be very similar to that used by a wide variety of grassroots organizations that need to wield national or international political power, such as the Sierra Club, Amnesty International, 350.org, and PFLAG. In this organizing model, a lightweight but official umbrella organization hires a small number of staff, curates the organization's brand, speaks for the organization, recommends but can't dictate long-term movement strategy, and spends a great deal of its time empowering local groups to be more effective.

To offer a real-world example of what such an organization could look like, I've created a bare-bones web structure to accompany the release of this essay:

- The mothership site for this essay is alphabetworkers.org, which envisions an organization called "Alphabet Workers Alliance".
- The web site has a sample logo, which provides a visual brand for the organization.
- The web site has a "sign up here!" email list embed, which is live.
- Social media handles for the organization are reserved and available.
- The sample organization that doesn't yet exist, Alphabet Workers Alliance, has a possible [statement of core principles](#) that spell out its scope, and its commitment to promote transparency, democracy, stakeholder governance, and human wellbeing.

Will the Google reform movement choose to bring some form of umbrella organization into existence? That's not a question for me to answer, that's a question for movement supporters to answer. If it's an idea that you support, feel free to sign up for the email list at alphabetworkers.org.

4. Embrace strategic nonviolence to build movement power

"I felt a deep sense of fulfillment in joining with others to put our bodies on the line and speak truth to power. Power, however, did not seem overly concerned with our truth. Power is concerned with power."
 - [Jonathan Matthew Smucker](#)

You don't get what you want from large corporate powerholders by asking nicely. In fact, you generally don't get what you want from large corporate powerholders by asking at all. In the majority of cases, the way that reform movements win concessions from large powerholders is to negotiate from a position of

real power - power that the movement has to build, step by step and action by action, until it sits as an equal stakeholder at the negotiating table.

The methods of building power through nonviolent campaigns have existed for thousands of years, but only in the past 50 years has academic scholarship started to acknowledge [strategic nonviolence as a discipline worthy of study](#). It's well beyond the scope of this essay to provide even a basic overview of nonviolence theory, but I can suggest a few principles, and beyond that I'll point you to the suggested reading section:

- Nonviolence sees power as vested in the collective action of people working together, not as emanating from privileged individuals or institutions. A nation-state leader, elected or not, only has power if a sufficient number of people choose to follow the orders of that leader. A corporation only has power if the company's workers choose to follow the corporation's orders. By acting together, large groups of people are able to counter the power of leaders, corporations, and governments, and establish themselves as equal negotiating stakeholders.

- Nonviolence tries to win large numbers of hearts and minds, because it needs many participants to succeed. It seeks to persuade, sometimes with words, sometimes with actions. A smart nonviolent movement will choose actions that persuade large numbers of people, even while those actions at the same time might anger a smaller number of people.

- Nonviolence is, as the term implies, nonviolent. Nonviolent movements don't use physical weapons, but rather use an array of strategies and tactics that win people to the movement's side, undermining opposition power structures.

- Nonviolence simultaneously upholds respect for the principle of the rule of law, while also acknowledging that there are just laws, and then there are unjust laws. Refusal to comply with unjust laws and policies is a core principle of active nonviolence.

- Nonviolence isn't nice to oppressors. Oppressors might get called out, named, shamed, and blamed. Oppressors might see their [conferences disrupted](#), their speeches [bird-dogged](#), or their [recruiting events chased out of major universities](#).

- *Strategic* nonviolence seeks to use nonviolence as part of a [planned campaign](#) to win specific objectives, rather than simply using nonviolence tactically on an action-by-action basis. Shifting from nonviolence-as-tactic to nonviolence-as-strategy is a critical maturity level that a nonviolent movement needs to achieve, if it wants to deliver long-lasting change.

Both the Google Women's Walkout of November 2018 and the [anti-retaliation sit-ins](#) held a few months later are examples of nonviolent tactics. Those singleton events, despite their size, haven't achieved most of the movement's demands because there has yet to be a series of sustained, strategic campaigns that build sufficient movement negotiating power.

5. Embrace working with the media, but always constructively

A solid nonviolent campaign nearly always goes hand in hand with a good media campaign, because good media coverage can win hearts and minds to grow the movement's base of support. The [Nashville lunch counter sit-ins](#) succeeded in part because there was media coverage. The Google Womens' Walkout was a huge tactical success because it dominated the tech news cycle for 24 hours, as the site-by-site walkouts

rolled through every timezone. Positive media coverage for a movement is a necessity.

Google, of course, indoctrinates employees from day one at the firm with a form of shame-driven emotional conditioning: never talk to the press, employees who talk to the press are Bad Employees, if you talk to the press you're Not Part Of the Google Family (there's that "family" metaphor again), if you do you'll be found out, fired, your children will be born with lycanthropy, shame and disgrace will follow your family name for generations to come, and presumably Google will also send somebody to say salacious things at your funeral and spit on your grave after you die. This indoctrination sometimes rides alongside a form of mental hostage-taking, which we can end up internalizing: "if we talk to the press, Google won't share information with us anymore!", sometimes phrased as "we'll lose our unique culture!" I've always found this argument somewhat mystifying. "Culture" isn't something owned or controlled by executives, and it's not like a cookie that they can either grant or withhold - "culture" is owned by us as workers.

The anti-media indoctrination, obviously, is designed to protect the firm, not to protect you and me. An employer's desire to suppress worker organizing efforts is so well understood that there's been U.S. legislation in place to protect worker and workplace speech rights since the 1930's - we can see a summary at the [National Labor Relations Board web site](#), or for a longer read, take a look at the [Challenging Workplace Gag Policies white paper](#) from the Brechner Center at the University of Florida.

Google ran into issues with U.S. labor law earlier this year, and found itself entering into a [settlement agreement with the NLRB](#) that includes this reminder of employee rights:

"WE WILL NOT prohibit you from talking to the press/media about your terms and conditions of employment or require you to obtain prior approval before speaking with the press/media and WE HAVE rescinded any such rules in our Appropriate Conduct Policy..."

So if the subject is specifically about conditions of employment, and you want to have a conversation with the press as part of concerted activity to improve the conditions of your employment, the Google reform movement doesn't have to, and shouldn't, ask for permission. We have the right to speak to the media as part of reforming Google, and the reform movement will want to make use of that right.

That said, there are caveats. With this topic, you knew there would be caveats.

First caveat: if you're talking to the press as a way of hurting somebody vulnerable, you're doing it wrong. The past several years, certainly since [gamergate](#), have seen a dramatic increase in the weaponization of communication to cause personal harm. The cultural right in the U.S. has built extensive troll armies who are experts at [doxxing](#), [swatting](#), mob-based online harassment, and incitement to violence. The legal right of a corporate reform movement to speak to the press about work conditions doesn't create an open season to share people's personal information, when the purpose or effect of sharing that information is to punch down, not punch up.

Second caveat: providing the media with direct quotes cut-and-pasted from your coworkers' email list posts is a bad move if you don't have their permission, and is counterproductive to building worker movement strength. Many Google workers like to at least pretend that we have a reasonable expectation of privacy when we post to internal lists, even though we know this isn't possible -- in theory every post to an email list could be demanded at any moment as part of a legal discovery process. If you're talking to the press, talk about your observations about your terms and conditions of employment, talk about whatever the latest draconian policy change was (this is also a "condition of employment"), but don't play the cut-and-paste-your-allies-without-their-permission game. The fundamental test should always be: "are

my actions helping to strengthen the Google reform movement and build power for positive change?” If your communication with the press can't credibly pass that test, you shouldn't be speaking with the press.

Third caveat, which is a corollary of the second: disclosing video recordings of all-hands meetings such as TGIF is similarly almost always counterproductive. The result is always, 100% of the time, guaranteed to trigger yet another round of Anti-Leak Rage Cycle - we could call it ALRAC, or if we're willing to engage in some spelling abuse, we could call it KALE: cyKle of Anti-Leak Enmity. The KALE cycle is now so predictable that we ought to engage in some meta-discussion whenever it happens. The next time that somebody discloses TGIF video to the press - and there *will* be a next time - here are the questions we should ask ourselves:

1. What conversations were just happening that have now been conveniently derailed?
2. Who benefits from derailing these conversations?
3. What steps can we, as Google workers, take to continue those conversations after the KALE cycle has completed its latest round?

That said, sure, if a senior executive gets up on stage at TGIF and says “Now, minions, [witness the firepower of this fully armed and operational battle station!](#)” then certainly, you have my permission to go straight to the press with the footage. There have certainly been times throughout history that corporations end up [so ethically compromised](#) as to merit aggressive whistleblowing.

Fourth caveat: there are limits to what U.S. labor law allows; beyond that, you're at increased risk, so you'll want to understand the territory you're in. Although the National Labor Relations Act protects “concerted action to improve the terms and conditions of employment”, what that actually means is naturally subject to NLRB decisions and, eventually, to case law. For the best advice on whether what you'd like to say to the media is protected workplace speech under U.S. law, you can't consult the internet, you need to [talk to a labor attorney](#). For workers outside of the U.S., obviously the situation depends on your in-country workplace speech laws.

My hope for future efforts by Google/Alphabet workers to communicate with the press is that we might see an uptick in people simply going on the record, named, and speaking about topics relevant to improving work conditions. So, let's try this approach right now. Here's an example:

Dear members of the media,

I've been employed at Google for 14 years in various roles, and have recently released a ridiculously wordy public essay about worker movement strategy, which you're reading right now. If you'd like to speak with me about the contents of this essay, or my thoughts on Alphabet workers' ongoing efforts to improve the terms and conditions of employment, you can reach me at hahne@alphabetworkers.org. Please provide a work email address so that I can confirm who you say you are. I won't provide email extracts written by other workers, share copies of company all-hands or other videos, or provide contact information for other Alphabet workers without their permission. I also won't converse with alt-right media -- you know who you are. All conversation needs to be focused on terms and conditions of employment. Realistically, if you'd like to write a “One year later: After the Google Womens' Walkout” article, my recommendation is that you reach out to the [people who organized that event](#), several of whom were negatively impacted by their bravery, and see if they'd be willing to grant an interview.”

This straightforward approach is compliant with U.S. law and with my speech rights. Since I'm not offering to put anyone else at risk, in theory it shouldn't increase anyone's fear other than my own. And who knows, maybe I can persuade somebody to write that one-year-after article, because I think it would

be worth writing.

An important clarification, so that there's no confusion: if you've been sexually harassed, threatened, or abused at Google, none of this applies to you, because you don't need a media strategy, you need an attorney. In the U.S., one way to find an attorney who can help is through the [legal referral program](#) at the [National Women's Law Center](#), which also runs the [Times Up Legal Defense Fund](#). I recommend that you speak with an anti-harassment attorney external to the company before you talk to corporate HR.

6. Win hearts and minds by sharing your story, listening to stories, and amplifying stories

One of the most powerful tools that we have to build movement strength is to share and amplify (retell) the stories of the people who have been harmed by the current system. Sharing stories builds empathy, and can motivate both the uninvolved and the apathetic to become more engaged with a reform movement. When we view the footage of the [Mountain View women's walkout rally](#), we can see that much of it is stories. The anti-retaliation sit-ins similarly gathered and published dozens of stories, available internally at [go/retaliation-stories](#). And [horror-story sharing](#) was one of the primary persuasion tools used by gig worker protection advocates in the successful, and huge, passage of [California AB5](#).

Leaving Google as an employee or as a temp/vendor/contractor, if you do so for ethical or mistreatment reasons, also offers an opportunity to tell your story. We've seen an uptick in the number of people taking this opportunity over the past few months. If you experienced mistreatment, telling your story as you depart turns your negative experience into a way to push for something better, and adds to the mounting evidence that Google needs to change its business practices and the practices of its contractors. If you can't safely tell your story out of fear of future retaliation, sometimes it's possible to route it through somebody who can anonymize and retell it for you.

On the other hand, you might be somebody in a more privileged position, which means you should likely be listening to and amplifying other people's stories, not necessarily talking about yourself. The decision about when to be the person speaking, when to be a listener, and when to be an amplifier is contextual, but should follow the principle that it's important to listen to, and amplify, the stories of people who traditionally don't get listened to, and who don't normally get their stories retold.

If you're at your desk at Google right now, you can help amplify people's stories, right now. Go to [go/workers-rights-in-the-water-closet](#), pick one of the story sheets from the three-page PDF, print it, take it to your nearest restroom, and put it into one of the display racks. Congratulations - you've just engaged in nonviolent persuasion, which is one form of nonviolent action.

7. Embrace openness and fearlessness over secrecy and fear

"I tried to join paranoiacs anonymous, but they won't tell me where they meet!" - Kip Addotta

To be successful, grass roots change movements need to scale to involve very large numbers of participants. Decades of historical research into successful nonviolent movements indicates that two foundational elements are crucial to movement success: [openness over secrecy, and fearlessness over fear](#). Fear sucks the energy and life out of a movement, dramatically reduces the number of participants, and impairs a movement's ability to scale. A culture of fear means that an organization constantly worries about infiltrators, treats newcomers with suspicion rather than welcome, spends time discussing encryption algorithms instead of launching actions to grow the movement, locks down documents instead

of sharing them with potential allies, and reduces the possibility of cross-organizational collaboration and strength.

Movement fear often originates from a culture of secrecy, which mistakenly believes that it's possible to scale a movement while also preventing opponents from finding out who the participants are and what they're doing. History, however, has demonstrated [time](#) and [time](#) and [time again](#) that it isn't possible to prevent the opposition from infiltrating and breaking movement secrecy. America's own National Security Agency has [failed at secrecy, multiple times](#), and even the webcomic XKCD has [noted secrecy's limitations](#). As long-time justice activist George Lakey wrote back in 1964, in one of the [key organizing books of the U.S. civil rights movement](#):

“[Secrecy] results in *inefficiency* because you have to cover up much that you do from your own members, *authoritarianism* because you cannot tell your members what is going on, and *mistrust*... You may as well open the book and be fully honest about your plans to begin with. You should try to plan tactics... which do not depend on secrecy for their value.” [[A Manual for Direct Action](#), p. 48]

The Google reform movement should commit itself to a best-practices movement-building approach: seek a culture of transparency in leadership and in activities, and a culture of fearlessness rather than fear. Event announcements, dates, and times should be public and shared widely. As our local employee advocacy groups mature and start to hold internal elections, the names of elected leaders should be public. Discussions between members and within leadership can take place using basic personal email; we shouldn't all have to run off and create Protonmail accounts. As the movement creates organizations, information about those organizations and how to join them should be freely available on a public web site. Certainly, organizations can and should protect basic membership and donor privacy, but it's possible to implement member/donor privacy protections without slipping into a fear-and-secrecy culture.

The need for a movement to avoid secrecy culture is so significant, yet so often disputed by movement participants, that I've [posted a larger section of extracts from Gene Sharp's book](#) where he specifically talks about the problems of secrecy and fear. If Gene Sharp can't convince us, nothing I say is likely to be persuasive either. For Google employees, I've also created a supplementary internal document, linked from [go/steppingupourgame](#), that draws some conclusions about the impact of fear-inducing versus non-fear-inducing email list signup policies for local reform groups. You can probably guess what the results are going to show.

8. Get to know your local temps, vendors, and contractors

To strengthen a worker movement requires, well, workers. Over [half of Alphabet's global workforce is now temps, vendors, and contractors](#) (TVCs), and they're often some of the more vulnerable members of the Alphabet worker population. If you're an employee, get to know the contractors around you, whether it's the desk worker who sits nearby, the microkitchen service workers, or the security guards. Who are they? What challenges do they encounter being not-an-employee at Google? Are there ways that you can support and defend them, or would your efforts put them at even higher risk? Do have the conversations, don't just assume. What barriers do you observe the company erecting that create silos between employees and TVCs, and what can you do to work around or break down those barriers?

One way to begin this process is to join the “tvcdiscussion” internal email group, and simply listen. It's

not a place for Google employees to jump in and start proposing solutions, so just listen. For my own part, what I've found is that the immediate needs of the TVC community are often quite different from my own immediate concerns. We need to continue to build a shared understanding of the different needs within the broader Alphabet worker community - doing so helps to build shared power.

9. White people: do your anti-racism groundwork. Men: do your anti-sexism groundwork. Everybody: do your cross-class groundwork.

A social movement that seeks to reform and redeem one of the largest corporations on the planet will need to engage and involve a vast number of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and while doing so needs to avoid reinforcing the patterns of oppression that the movement seeks to dismantle. Social change history is filled with stories of movements that were unable to work with each other effectively, or at all, due to racism, sexism, classism, or other internalized biases within the movements themselves. Our efforts to understand and reduce these biases are the movement's equivalent of a daily exercise routine: these efforts build strong bodies in a dozen different ways. One of the responsibilities of everyone in a traditional position of social advantage will be to do our homework - and often, this means it's time to order the books and do the reading. In my own case, as the Iowa-raised, white, male, professional-class person that I am, it means that I still have a lot of books to read.

Although I'm hardly an optimal source to provide the perfect reading lists on anti-racism, anti-sexism, and cross-class organizing, here's an initial book list. Feel free to build your own list, based on your own sense of where you need to strengthen your understanding.

Anti-racism:

The top two books that I've seen recommended for white people in the U.S. who need an introductory understanding of racism in America are Ta-Nehisi Coates' [*Between the World and Me*](#), and Michelle Alexander's [*The New Jim Crow*](#). The first offers insight into the lived experience of being a black man in America, while the second describes in both statistics and story how the demon of racism didn't die with the end of Jim Crow, it just took up residence in the new host body of America's mass incarceration system.

Beyond these two, I've added Robin Diangelo's [*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*](#) to my list. The great (but actually, not-great) thing about a book named *White Fragility* is that when the author visits your tech firm's Mountain View campus, and it's announced on company email lists that she'll be giving a talk about the book, it triggers an outbreak of... white fragility. There aren't that many books where simply announcing the name of the title proves the point, but this is one of them.

Anti-sexism:

This will date me, however I continue to appreciate Sandra Bem's [*The Lenses of Gender*](#), published back in 1994, due to its coverage of the driving ideologies underpinning sexism. The ideologies are still with us today and unfortunately still going strong. Advocacy for one of them, biological essentialism, was a contributing factor to the [dismissal of former Google employee James Damore](#) in 2017.

On the history of computing side, I've heard good things about [*Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing*](#), just published in 2018. From the descriptive text: "*Programmed Inequality* takes aim at the fiction of technological meritocracy. Hicks

explains why, even today, possessing technical skill is not enough to ensure that women will rise to the top in science and technology fields.”

Beyond these, there are many reading lists - as one example, here's "[A reading list for men who care about feminism](#)", (it's actually three lists), from business and culture news publisher Quartz.

Cross-class:

Cross-class work is both important and challenging, particularly in the U.S, where we aren't taught to see socio-economic class, or we use simplistic and generally unproductive terms like “upper / middle / lower” class. A more productive taxonomy often starts with “working class / professional class / ownership class”, however there are multiple approaches and nuances within the approaches.

From class-conscious information sites [classism.org](#) and [classmatters.org](#), here are a few key books:

- Betsy Leondar-Wright, [Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures](#), 2014.
- Fred Rose, [Coalitions across the Class Divide](#), Cornell University, 1999.
- Linda Stout, [Bridging the Class Divide and other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing](#), Beacon, 1997.

10. Everybody who isn't at Google: keep up the external pressure, this has to be a mass effort

One trend that I've seen in the media recently proposes this narrative: “don't worry, Google workers will solve Google's ethical problems themselves!” One example of the genre is this recent Guardian headline, “[Who stands between you and AI dystopia? These Google activists](#)”. My response is, bluntly, no, not on our own. Not going to happen, can't happen. It's nearly impossible to reform an entrenched system strictly from within - history indicates that in the vast majority of cases we also need external force, typically in large quantities. In the case of this Guardian article, the author actually agrees and ends by calling for solidarity of non-Google people *with* Google workers, but whoever wrote the headline missed the point.

Can I, a project manager in the Google display ads department, save the world from AI dystopia? Sure, let me add that to my action item list, how hard could it be? Let's take a quick run through a typical Google project manager's work environment. I arrive at work and badge through several sets of doors, creating badge system database records that track my location with a timestamp. Passing by multiple unarmed security guards (now [unionized since 2018!](#)), I head to my desk, constantly under the watchful eye of the omnipresent security cameras installed in all Google buildings, because you can never be too careful. At my desk is a company-issued laptop which uses its baked-in machine certificate to authenticate for the desktop applications that I need to do my job. The preinstalled Chrome browser, which I must use for portions of my job, now includes an [uninstallable “community moderation” extension](#), which was hurried through the internal privacy review process, has design documents that I'm not allowed to read, and in its first iteration is allegedly designed to warn (or prevent?) people from booking large meetings. God only knows what it will do in its second or third iterations. Such behavior might block, say, employees from organizing a mid-sized meeting to allow us to mobilize against that AI dystopia we're supposed to be saving the rest of you from.

If I discover a project that looks ethically problematic, what to do? I could write a document internally to

share my concerns with my fellow employees, but management will often simply take down the document and reprimand me, or maybe just fire me. Or perhaps it will declare that my remarks are “political” and [attempt to shut them down](#) using that policy route. I could use the open-questions web tool to submit a question to the weekly Google allhands meeting, but that question might just [mysteriously disappear from the list](#). I could try to organize my coworkers to suggest that we form a union, but [management might just try to shut it down](#) (and that was in Switzerland, which has strong union protections!). If I report sexual harassment or abuse, past history suggests that I might find myself [subject to retaliation](#). Even Google's internal posting of its recent [National Labor Relations Board settlement notice](#), which the firm was legally required to announce, was initially “shared” by the company online as a PDF that couldn't be downloaded, copied, or reshared with others.

Not surprisingly, one of the primary impacts of this collection of past behaviors, and others like them, is the creation of employee fear. Fear of retaliation, fear of harassment, fear of gaslighting, fear of threats to your immigration status, fear of being fired and losing your health care -- the list goes on. In such a climate, the fact that anyone at all was willing to whistleblow about [Google's drone-training project Maven](#) or the [efforts to produce a censored search engine for China](#) is a minor miracle.

So no, Google employees alone can't save the world from AI dystopia, or more generally from the damage caused by a corporate machine gone rogue. It will take much more. If I try to organize a project to collect and publicly release horror stories about Youtube's recommendation algorithm, I presumably get fired - but the [Mozilla Foundation's Youtube Regrets project](#) can do that. If I organize an arrest action outside of Google's London offices to protest the company's continued hosting of climate denialism videos, I presumably get fired a second time - but [Extinction Rebellion can, and did](#), do precisely that. It will take protest organizations protesting, advocacy organizations advocating, researchers publishing [articles on the dangers of AI bias amplification](#), plus more. The need to have more than just Google employees fighting for Google reform is precisely why the movement needs to open to external, non-Google participants.

I want to put a particular call out here to California and New York lawmakers: we need you to pass laws that strengthen workplace speech protections for employees and contractors. The current carve-outs for employee speech in the National Labor Relations Act were written in the 1930's, when the way workers organized was to stand outside the factory door with a bullhorn and a pile of leaflets, while the employer [hired the Pinkertons](#) to infiltrate, assault and intimidate them. Worker and ethics activism within the modern tech corporation doesn't work like this. All systems are completely electronic, employees work from hundreds of locations around the globe, over half of typical company functions are outsourced to vendors and contractors, and communication is via corporate-maintained email, calendar, instant messaging, and videoconferencing systems. One thing hasn't changed, however: our employers still, 100 years later, [hire the Pinkertons](#).

The National Labor Relations Board ruling that protects employee rights to use company email for organizing purposes is known as [Purple Communications](#), and it's likely [about to be shredded](#) by the current [worker-hostile NLRB](#). Workers need legislative protection to preserve and strengthen this standard. I should have the right to use a company calendar system to book a company room to host a know-your-labor-rights talk by an outside labor attorney of my choice; I should have the right to announce that talk via internal email; I should have the right to use the videoconferencing system in the room to offer that talk to other company locations, and the right to book rooms at those locations; and I should have the right to use the videoconferencing recording function to record the talk and make it available for later employee playback. Yet [Google has filed legal briefs with the NLRB that oppose even allowing employees to use email](#). If Purple Communications goes down, I'll bet large numbers of donuts that Google will seek to muzzle many of the reform advocacy email lists within the firm, one of which was used to organize the Women's Walkout in 2018.

We can be confident that no improvements in the area of worker communications rights for organizing have a snowball's chance of happening at the U.S. federal level until at least 2021, but as the two states that contain the bulk of Alphabet's workforce, California and New York might be able to put in place some state-level laws to protect workers from the likely demise of the Purple Communications NLRB standard.

So, California and New York state lawmakers: put it on your action item list for the next legislative cycle, and get to work. You want to stop AI dystopia? Protect the people resisting it.

Conclusion

The larger picture, of course, is that this struggle isn't simply about Google. It isn't even just about the aggregate abuses of the tech sector, whether it's [sweatshop conditions at Amazon](#), Facebook openly [allowing lies in political advertisements](#), or Palantir [providing the software that helps put kids in cages](#) at the U.S. border. The struggle to reform Google is a struggle over what sort of global society we want to create. Will we continue to build systems, structures, software, corporations, that uphold long-standing patterns of hierarchy, whether by intent or simply by design? Men over women, white over black, owner over worker, employee over contractor, rich over poor - these hierarchies have existed for a long time. It's our collective job as a society to dismantle them. The Google Women's Walkout of 2018 was a first step towards that dismantling. It won't be the last.

Google is good: it has the capacity to serve society and make lives better.

Google is fallen: it supports and facilitates systems of oppression and harm, and it has deep-rooted problems with a culture of sexism and retaliation.

Google must be redeemed: by all of us, working together. May we have the courage, the wisdom, the resilience, and the strength to make it so.

About the author

Bruce Hahne joined Google on Halloween of 2005, which means both that he's been at the company longer than nearly all of Google's current executives, and that the HR coordinator teaching new-hire orientation on his first day was dressed as a smurf. He's an armchair scholar of strategic nonviolence theory and practice, and served as co-organizer of the nonviolent mass arrest action at the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) General Assembly in June 2000, which protested the denomination's anti-LGBTQ policies. He was the official movement videographer for the [Women's Walkout at Google Mountain View HQ](#) in 2018. He can be reached at hahne@alphabetworkers.org

Additional suggested reading

This material is in addition to the suggestions of section 9.

Kimberly Bobo, Steve Max, and Jackie Kendall, *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, 3rd edition, Seven Locks Press, 2001

George Lakey, *How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning*, Melville House Publishing, 2018.

George Lakey, “Why Campaigns, Not Protests, Get the Goods”, Oct. 29, 2016, wagingnonviolence.org/2016/10/election-campaigns-one-off-protests/

Staughton and Alice Lynd, *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*, 3rd edition, Orbis Books, 2018

Staughton Lynd and Daniel Gross, *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer: Building Solidarity While Staying Clear of the Law*, 2nd edition, PM Press, 2011.

Bill Moyer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*, New Society Publishers, 2001.

Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, three-volume series, Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973

Google National Labor Relations Board settlement public notice, from NLRB case 32-CA-176462, September 2019. PDF at tinyurl.com/nlrb-notice-sept2019

Employees' Right to Speak to the Media: Challenging Workplace Gag Policies, Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, University of Florida, January 2019. brechner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NLRB-Brechner-gag-order-white-paper.pdf

Legal stuff

The publication of this essay is part of protected, concerted effort to improve work conditions at Alphabet - although I don't have to say that for it to be true. During my 14 years at Google, not once have I been summoned to “a friendly chat with HR” or with the Google legal department, so if, hypothetically, such a demand for a meeting were suddenly to occur, it would present the appearance to me that Google is watching out for my protected concerted activities. Creating such an appearance would be a violation of Google's recent [settlement agreement](#) under [National Labor Relations Board case 32-A-176462](#).

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