

SUMMARY

MAKE TROUBLE STANDING UP, SPEAKING OUT AND FINDING THE COURAGE TO LEAD

CECILE RICHARDS



Summary of «Make Trouble: Standing Up, Speaking Out and Finding the Courage to Lead» by Cecile Richards

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Introduction

What do you believe in? And how far would you go to stand up for it? Would you risk being ostracized by everyone around you? Would you risk gaining a negative reputation as a “hell-raiser” or “troublemaker?” That’s what Cecile Richards has done ever since she learned, as a bold little girl growing up in Texas, that fighting for your beliefs means facing a lot of resistance. But so far from being deterred by that pushback, Cecile has kept fighting, relying on her mantra “if you want to make change, then you have to make trouble!” So, in this summary, we’ll examine Cecile’s relationship with activism, what motivates her to keep making trouble, and what we can put into practice for creating social change.

Cecile's Background Prepared Her for a Life of Activism

All of us are influenced by our upbringing in one way or another. Whether we learn what not to do or find that we want to emulate our parents, our childhood experiences have a profound impact and they help mold the adults we later become. And Cecile Richards was no different. Growing up as the daughter of a civil rights attorney and the second female governor of Texas, Cecile's parents were already teaching her to go against the status quo. This was especially vital in a conservative state like Texas, which resisted any attempts at progressive thinking— including twelve-year-old Cecile's refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer in her sixth-grade class.

At a young age, Cecile knew that, even though her family wasn't religious and avoiding religion might be a personal choice, it's still unconstitutional to insist on religious expression in a public school. So, when she refused to conform and recite these things along with everyone else, Cecile wasn't just standing up for her own civil rights, she was also advocating against a violation of the law. Her teachers didn't quite see it that, however. As her teacher, Mrs. Powers, put it, "Little lady, you're just trying to make trouble."

That was when Cecile learned that, to those who prefer to go with the flow, standing up for your beliefs will always be a negative thing and an important fight for one's rights might be simply labeled "troublemaking." And although Cecile was a straight-A student at that time, with grades which proved she followed the rules and respected authority, she learned

that day that sometimes, you have to make a choice between questioning authority or following the rules even when you know they're wrong.

Cecile's Passion for Activism Was Motivated by Others

As we all know, there's a difference between breaking the rules simply because you can and standing up to injustice. (Just take a look at any teenager who refuses to clean their room!) The difference, of course, lies in a connection with others. Because when you choose to fight for someone else's rights or to make the world a kinder place for those you love, you're driven by a motivation that extends far beyond mere personal gain. And that was exactly the case for Cecile, who once again found herself faced with an important fight in college.

When the campus janitors at Brown University organized a strike, Cecile challenged the university administrators' position that the janitors were simply being rebellious and helped them campaign for fair working conditions. And after joining a student support group in favor of the janitors' fight, Cecile got involved in every way she could, whether it was handing out pamphlets or organizing a meeting between the janitors and university administrators to resolve a conflict. By engaging with activism on every level of the janitors' fight, Cecile found that helping in any way— no matter how small— can make a big difference.

And she was so invigorated by this experience that when the campus librarians went on strike later, she was inspired to help them as well! To support the librarians, Cecile and her new activist friends from the student support group formed a human chain, blocking other students from using the library during the strike. However, as many of her other friends and classmates crossed over them to use the library anyway, Cecile learned

another important lesson. When you stand up for what you believe in, people won't always be on your side, and it might even mean you lose friends.

These experiences also taught her a lot about her future ambitions. Because where many of her friends— even those who had been fierce activists in college— pursued “safe” jobs after college and went into careers that wouldn't require them to challenge anything, Cecile felt she couldn't fit into that life. She wanted to move on to the next fight and continue helping causes, one right after another. But, as any college graduate knows, one of your primary concerns after college is how you're going to pay the bills, and Cecile was no different. She knew activism was unlikely to land her even a paying job, much less one that paid well. However, she was so determined that she started writing letters to union organizers all around the country, and finally, one in New Orleans offered her a job!

This turned out to be the perfect fit for Cecile, who was soon faced with the plight of impoverished female hotel workers, many of whom were immigrants and were severely underpaid for the cooking, cleaning, and heavy labor they did. And to add insult to injury, they were passed over for customer service or front desk positions in favor of white, male counterparts. Cecile recognized this for the discrimination it was and immediately set out to change these women's lives for the better.

Cecile Learns to be Her Own Hero

Have you ever been in a situation that made you wonder, “Isn’t somebody going to do something about this??” Chances are, we all have at one point or another, but most of us usually stop at that thought. And in so doing, we make the mistake of assuming that someone else will step in and solve the problem or that achieving social change is someone else’s responsibility. But what would happen if we all thought that?

Cecile learned to target that mindset head on, teaching herself that in any case where she wanted somebody to do something, that “somebody” could be her! And by putting this attitude in practice, she learned to go out and attack problems head on. And although Cecile’s entire life is a great example of proactive problem-solving, one instance in particular stands out: her experience with the Texas State Board of Education in the 1990s. When the board met to discuss its new curriculum for the upcoming school year, Cecile noticed that they were oppressively conservative, voting to purge the curriculum of anything that hinted at equal rights for women, LGBT inclusion, sex education, or preserving the environment. And to make matters worse, many of the board members were also part of the Christian Coalition, a far-right movement which opposed pretty much everything Cecile stood for.

So, although she didn’t know anything about setting up a new organization on her own, Cecile was determined to fight the Christian Coalition’s efforts at censorship. And that very same day, she started the Texas Freedom Network in her living room. A liberal non-profit group dedicated to preserving the separation of church and state in schools, strengthening

education, and teaching inclusion, today TFN has over 24,000 members and works with more than 130,000 community leaders and organizers in Texas. And although she started with nothing more than a \$100 check from her grandmother and her own determination to apply for grants, engage in community outreach, and recruit like-minded allies, Cecile ultimately accomplished far more than her original intention to fight curriculum censorship.

Cecile's Keys to Organization

The overwhelming success of the Texas Freedom Network might have been enough for some people, but not Cecile. Not content to settle for resting on her new accomplishment, she soon dove back into activism in 2004, when she founded America Votes. Working with like-minded voters to eliminate the petty divisions that often arise between political parties, America Votes aimed to unite voters through the advancement of progressive politics and increase voter turnout for Democratic candidates.

Through the success of developing this organization, Cecile learned some new practical tips for successful activism that each of us can put into practice. Some of her key takeaways include the importance of starting small and setting manageable goals. After all, “change the world” is a pretty tall order when you look at it that way, but what if you broke it down into one cause, one goal, one practical step you can take today? When you break a goal down into small chunks that you can reasonably accomplish, you can avoid burnout and keep momentum going.

She also learned that you should never be afraid to ask for money. This one might be a bit tougher for some of us to put into practice, because talking about money always feels a little awkward. But if you can remind yourself that you're the somebody who's going to do something about this, it gets a little easier. Because after all, if you don't ask others to support your cause, who will? That money isn't going to come out of nowhere and your goal can't be accomplished without it. So, concentrate on building a following and taking small actionable steps. Inspiring others to put something towards your goal is just one of those steps and you can do it!

It's also important to know Cecile's rules of organizing because these are what helped her keep everything on track as she started both America Votes and the Texas Freedom Network. So, remember that the first rule is to give everyone the floor. Maybe not all at once, but you should always be willing to let every member of your organization share their views. And when you give them that chance to speak, make sure you're listening and willing to learn from what they have to say. Rule number two is keeping in mind that building a following is only 20% of the work. If you have something to say, people will come listen at least once.

Stop Selling Yourself Short!

The title of this chapter highlights another important lesson Cecile learned, because in her quest to break down social boundaries, she discovered the importance of challenging her own comfort zone as well. This is a vital message to internalize because, after all, how many times do we talk ourselves out of something due to our own insecurities? Whether we consider ourselves to be unqualified, or not good enough, it's often easier to stay in the box we've constructed for ourselves, even if that box is comprised of negative thoughts.

Cecile learned the importance of challenging this firsthand from her mother Ann. Remember how we mentioned that Cecile's mother was the second female governor of Texas? Well, contrary to what you might think, Ann didn't have a background in politics at all! In fact, she started out as an average housewife who got fed up of the assumption that, as a woman, she was only good for housework. Rejecting both social norms and a life of domesticity, Ann launched her campaign for governor with little more than her own unwavering self-belief. And that got her elected!

From her mother's example, Cecile learned that women often sell themselves short because they view themselves as underqualified or undeserving, but that attacking this mindset can bring success beyond your wildest expectations. She was asked to put that understanding into practice later in life when she received an unexpected call from Planned Parenthood, asking her to interview for the position of president. At first,

Cecile almost declined the offer, justifying her decision with the fact that it wasn't really a good time; she was so busy with America Votes and the Texas Freedom Network. And for that matter, she wondered if she was even qualified for the role.

But with her mother's encouragement and the reminder that she'd never know unless she tried, Cecile took the interview. And by the end of her second interview, neither Cecile nor the board of Planned Parenthood had any doubts that she was indeed perfect for the job. So, today, Cecile can add "president of Planned Parenthood" to her growing list of causes and qualifications, and it's all because she was encouraged to try.

In the course of this opportunity, she also learned that if women tend to sell themselves short, many men do the exact opposite. Although they may be underqualified and very undeserving, they often aggressively pursue success anyway, backed only by the (often misguided) belief that they should be considered for that position. This is especially true when it comes to running for public office!

So, the next time you find yourself engaging in negative self-talk or you're convinced you'll fail a job interview, take a moment to think about Ann Richards' brave stand and the legacy she passed on to her daughter. Think about Cecile and her unfailing dedication to pursuing her goals. And then ask yourself if you're not every bit as qualified as the next guy (or maybe even more!). You might find that the only thing holding you back is your habit of selling yourself short!

Overcoming Setbacks

What do you do when things don't go the way you planned? Do you give up and tell yourself you shouldn't have tried in the first place? Or do you roll up your sleeves and tell yourself you can fix it? As you've probably already noticed, Cecile falls into the latter category and we all can benefit from her example! Because Cecile's story proves that, even after encountering one of her most substantial setbacks, you can still press forward.

Although she had already faced a number of obstacles throughout her life, Cecile's most significant setback arrived when she found herself on trial in 2015. While Cecile herself had done nothing wrong, she had been called to stand in defense of Planned Parenthood, which had come under fire in 2005 after some doctored footage emerged, claiming the organization was selling fetal tissue for profit. This was the perfect ammunition for anti-abortion activists and they pounced immediately, calling for Planned Parenthood to be defunded.

Many pro-choice activists like Cecile affirm that the fight against abortion is really a fight to control women's bodies and this theory certainly appears to be confirmed by the fact that four separate congressional committees had been called to investigate the allegations against Planned Parenthood. (For the record, that's more committees than had been assigned to such notable crises as the 2008 financial crash or the Enron scandal!) So, feeling like they were being attacked by a very targeted conspiracy, Cecile and her

colleagues at Planned Parenthood were forced to brace for the fight of their lives.

It would have been so easy to give up. Undoubtedly, they were so scared and weary that it was tempting! But Cecile lead the fight with strength and quiet reserve and, refusing to be ruffled by the impending sense of fear, she focused her energies on the careful organization of compiling a binder that justified every dollar spent and every decision made at every Planned Parenthood clinic around the country. In the end, her diligence generated a binder that was more than 6 inches thick and covered over 600 clinics!

It also paid off, because thanks to Cecile's tireless dedication and refusal to give up, the court had no choice but to acknowledge that there was no truth to the allegations and that the footage had been altered as part of a calculated attack on Planned Parenthood.

By this point, if anyone deserved a break, it was Cecile! But instead of taking a much-needed nap, she began preparing for an appearance on the Rachel Maddow show to talk about her latest victory. And while she was on the way, another unexpected opportunity arrived in the form of a phone call from Hilary Clinton, reaching out to congratulate her on her win.

Final Summary

If you want to make change, you have to make trouble. That's Cecile Richards' mantra, pure and simple, and it's something she's lived by her entire life. However, it's not just something that applies to Cecile! No matter what our cause is, no matter how we are, each of us can accept that we have to fight to make the world a better place. Each of us can apply this mantra to our lives.



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