

# What Jamie Oliver Can Teach Sustainability Activists

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British chef [Jamie Oliver](#) has a long track record of activism and change-making.

His first foray was 2002's '[Jamie's Kitchen](#)', in which fifteen disadvantaged young people were offered an opportunity in Oliver's new restaurant, Fifteen, if they successfully completed the training. Five of the original group, all of whom battled problems including homelessness, mental health issues and substance abuse, went on to secure cooking careers, four in top restaurants in London and one who opened his own catering business.

Oliver's efforts with 2004's '[Jamie's School Dinners](#)' to improve school lunches in the UK, 2010's Emmy Award Winning '[Food Revolution](#)' in the US in West Virginia, and a second series of Food Revolution in 2011 in Los Angeles, were intent on changing one of the most personal, and yet also political, of human actions – what people put in their mouths.

Any student of change would do well to watch these series and pay close attention to Oliver's modus operandi, most likely informed by people skilled in the art and science of persuasion, but also carried by the leadership and interpersonal skills of Oliver himself.

Although the issues Oliver was tackling were reviewed, praised, criticised and commented on widely, there are surprisingly few case studies out there capturing the lessons for application by others.

Yet here we have many of the situations change agents face presented as a story, with real people and situations rather than a list of theoretical concepts, and someone working his way through the pleasures and pains of change, in a familiar and readily digestible format (television).

Oliver's Food Revolution site includes a section entitled '*A Case Study For Non-profits On How To Activate The Crowd*' which offers some guidelines on how to animate and engage a community. '*A Platform for Change*' sets out some concrete steps on specific issues.

However the advice still focuses largely on the mechanics for change:

- 1. have a simple message that people grasp.*
- 2. have a vivid call to action that is linked to your message – host an event, share your knowledge, inspire better food education.*
- 3. allow everyone to get involved. Use all networks at your disposal to establish a community around your cause.*
- 4. focus on under 25s – get their attention, their networks are often the most active and connected.*
- 5. secure the commitment of like-minded companies, organizations and individuals to unify expertise and support the message.*
- 6. get celebrities and influencers to spread the word to increase the reach of your message.*
- 7. monitor the conversation, engage with the community and measure your results.*

*This will help you to learn where your campaign is working well, and how it can be developed further.*

All absolutely valid and useful pieces of advice. But the most powerful methods of change are not in what we do, but how we do it – how we persuade people to get involved, how we frame our messages, how we get people's buy-in, how to manage the dynamics of change.

At this deeper level, the lessons from Oliver's work for change agents include:

He recognised and accepted that those he came into conflict with might **fear that their position, status or authority was being questioned or threatened:**

Oliver's first roadblock in both the UK and the US was the school dinner ladies – trained to provide school food with little preparation needed other than reheating; adamant about what students would and would not eat; under pressure and working to feed hundreds of mouths each day – and in walks a young fellow intent on changing it all. To those staff, his presence would have seemed like something was not working well, and by inference, they themselves were doing something wrong.

To parents, especially in the UK, he was usurping their authority over their children, even telling them they were not good parents. Maybe he was right in some cases – such as the parents who took to handing fast food through the school fence to keep their kids happy and undermine Oliver's initiative.

By putting himself in the lunch ladies' shoes, learning their work role and being on the coalface of change, he showed he was willing to see how things worked from their perspective, and earned their trust – which kept the working relationship intact, even when they didn't agree on issues.

During the first Food Revolution series in Huntington, West Virginia, Oliver came under attack from a local radio DJ, who voiced the concerns of people worried that Oliver was there to ridicule and stigmatise their home for being the fattest and unhealthiest city in the United States, and then broadcast it around the world in a television series (although the town had been chosen based on government statistics about diet-related illness and death).

By staying the course with the community, involving people and building momentum for the initiative, Oliver turned 'DJ Rod' – and his media influence – from the most vocal critic of the Food Revolution to one of its most staunch supporters.

Oliver worked to morph his adversaries into his allies; rather than wanting to 'neutralise' or silence DJ Rod, his mission was to get him involved in and excited about the Food Revolution.

And in the second Food Revolution series, he butted heads with the Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD), who oversee the largest public school system in California.

The LAUSD, although they welcomed Oliver's input to help reinvent menus, were uncomfortable with the presence of Oliver and his cameras documenting the food systems they were in charge of.

The LAUSD were understandably wary of how the school would be portrayed, and did not see eye to eye with Oliver, who considered the series an opportunity for the school to position itself a leader of positive change:

*Four hours of TV back home got a billion dollars from the British government, got rubbish in vending machines taken out, got new standards, fresh produce, local food and we're on the beginning of transition of change.*

Jamie Oliver on [Oprah, 28 March 2010](#)

Arguably, the LAUSD itself was the cause of the conflict it sought to avoid, creating a drama and a news story around revoking Oliver's filming permits, and then access to its schools altogether.

By persisting in the face of resistance and being undermined, Oliver was able to influence not only the composition of school menus, but the composition of the LAUSD Board.

He made things **visible**:

My most vivid memories of the Food Revolution series are the visual elements of the documentaries, Oliver's stunts:

The absurd *comedy* of seeing him dressed up as a giant pea pod, running across a schoolyard with a gaggle of squealing kids tearing after him, while he shouts 'Eat your vegetables!'

The visceral *horror* of seeing him literally dump the amount of fat consumed by the school's children in one year on a tarpaulin in the school yard.

In the second Food Revolution series, Oliver waged war on flavoured milk in schools, demonstrating how much sugar was in a week's worth of milk consumed at the school by pouring an equivalent amount of sand into a school bus.

Oliver is well aware that these highly visual stunts are the most effective means communication and getting people to internalise a message:

*As far as I'm concerned, we just made an incredible documentary with big stunts. Why do we do big stunts? Because a lot of the information we work with is bloody boring. And I don't expect any public, let alone the Americans, to be remotely interested.*

The high impact visuals of these stunts work on two levels – it creates an *emotional* response in the audience, and it makes great content for being picked up and distributed through mainstream and social media.

On the day of the 'sugar' stunt, there were barely two dozen people there. Yet long after the series went to air, the video and images of the stunt are still on the internet, having been picked up by bloggers and other media.

Closely related to making things visible, he made participating in Food Revolution activities a **social norm**:

In the Food Revolution Kitchen, he posts an image of everyone who has signed up to support the initiative. It shows other people are on board, and helps people to become involved because other people are doing it too:

That, and another of his stunts, arranging a very public, visible, cooking Flash Mob which got the town talking.

He made things **tangible**:

To get his message of health and nutrition across to a family featured in the first Food Revolution series, Oliver placed the family's weekly meals – typically processed foods and fast food – on the kitchen table all at once.

The golden rule of writers is 'show don't tell', and it's a rule that applies equally to change work. Seeing it, smelling it, realising the scale of it, touching it all affected the person he was engaging with in a much deeper way than simply telling her.

Also in the first Food Revolution series, he took his arch-adversary, DJ Rod, to a local funeral home where the radio announcer was shocked to see the massive sized caskets in which chronically obese people are buried. The turning point for Rod was hearing from the funeral director about conversations he has with grieving families in relation to the burial process for overweight corpses, how the casket has to be transported in the back of a cargo van, how cremation is not an option and the coffin requires two grave spaces. It made the issues Oliver was campaigning on real, immediate in his own community – and the messenger was a local, like himself.

When seeking the support of top local chefs to mentor students, Oliver invited them to lunch – and then served them all a range of foods that comprise a standard public school lunch. The chefs were horrified at the low quality of the food, and agreed to participate.

He understood and **empathised with people**.

In the second Food Revolution series, he met a single father of two boys, 14 and 10, who were all living on fast food and takeaways, even though the boys did not like the food.

The family wanted to change – but first Oliver had to create an 'interruption' to business as usual. He took the family on one of their trips to the drive through, but unbeknown to the family, he had arranged to keep the orders coming, filling their car with the amount of fast food the family eat in a month. But that wasn't all.

While they were at the drive through, the show's producers entered the family's house and covered every surface with thousands of dollars worth of fast food amounting to what the father and his sons would eat in a year. The message hit home.

Importantly, Oliver was not just about showing them what they weren't doing well – he was also there to show them what they could do, and to ensure they had support in the days following his visit so that the change would 'stick'.

He issued a challenge (ie. made it into a game) – could he guide the boys to cook a chicken and salad lunch in less time, and more cheaply, than it took their father to go to the drive through, order food and make it home? Yes they could! The boys' meal came to \$23 in ingredients, the takeaway, \$31. When their father came home 45 minutes later, Jamie and his sons were throwing a football in the street, lunch already made.

He didn't **judge anyone**.

There are all sorts of reasons people make poor food choices, from economic circumstances to lacking skills to not coping in other areas of life or not knowing how to change. Although he pulled no punches in stating what needed to change and why, in being able to listen, to be gentle and to help people realise what they can do, he empowered people he encountered.

He challenged **entrenched systems**.

No change worth making ever happened without challenging power structures.

In Oliver's case, the most difficult block he encountered in his school food series was not kids unused to fresh healthy food, not parents unwilling to hear his call for change, not even the formidable school dinner ladies whose work roles would be reinvented, but the Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD).

The authority had the power to grant Oliver access to work and film in the schools (or not), and is also in charge of making decisions on suppliers and budgets for school food.

They didn't want him to film in the school's cafeteria. With the assistance of school staff who were his allies, a loophole was found that allowed Oliver back into the school to teach or film, but he would not be allowed near the kitchen.

The authorities then revoked permission for all filming on the school grounds.

Oliver responded by establishing a shop front, the Food Revolution Kitchen, across the road from the school so that students could still participate after school hours. He showed the students that he was not abandoning the initiative when things got tough.

He held his ground, even when it was difficult – even when it hurt:

*I hate making TV documentaries, because it takes quite a lot of energy to know that you're going to get your arse kicked and people will hate you, or fight you, for large proportions of time.*

*You know, change is very hard – structures, organisations, businesses, people, anyone really. And if you're shining a light on one of the most unhealthy places in the world, it has to be a car crash, there's no pretty way. I knew what I was flying over there for, I knew it would be horrible, but I hadn't done horrible without my family. When you have shit days you need to be able to go and hug your kids, do you know what I mean? I didn't have that, and it was hard, really hard.*

Oliver remained steadfast to his beliefs and his mission, and withstood the heat he generated that comes with being an instigator of change.

In 2010, Oliver was awarded the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) prize for his activism, which offers him a platform to call on the TED community and on influencers to help him fulfil his wish:

*I wish for your help to create a strong, sustainable movement to educate every child about food, inspire families to cook again and empower people everywhere to fight obesity.*

Here is the [TED talk](#) he delivered when receiving his prize.

But for all his public profile, connections, awards, ability to command resources and personable manner, it didn't equate to making change easier for Jamie Oliver, MBE, celebrity tv chef, author, film maker, businessman – he was in exactly the same position as change agents everywhere find themselves: encountering resistance, facing communication challenges, doing the hard yards.

So perhaps his most important lesson on creating change is – never give up!

*I reckon I could get in to the head of food service in any Russian cities. I reckon I could get into North Korea inside a week.*

That's Jamie Oliver, in response to being shut out of LA's public school cafeterias. No change worth making was ever easy.

Who else do you think of in the public eye, or do you know personally, who is or has been an effective change maker? How were they effective in their work?

What techniques do you use to maintain your spirit in the face of resistance, even hostility?