



## Are you a Wader, Swimmer, or Diver?

By Sheila Cameron

If you've been following Elisa Parker and me you may have heard us reference the Waders/Swimmers/Divers of activism and engagement. While it is a simple metaphor for interviews and calls to action, we've observed it works well in application; organizing people and helping them stay engaged. It is a concept based on my experience as a media producer, particularly during the early days of developing web content that dovetailed with traditional media. It is a popular concept in those circles that I've adapted since working on the **Women's March Sacramento**. I shared these concepts with **Indivisible Women Nevada County**

as we worked to understand, convey and support messages across different experiences. I refer to it often to help me reframe things that feel too personal or distracting. It is all personal really, but I've been sidelined by reactive actions when I needed to focus on creating the change I'd like to see. Learning to avoid that or disengage is a lifelong process. I'm a work in progress on taking the high road for greater good.

Because much of our political discourse is done through social media, many concepts are directly transferable but the real fuel of activism is the passion that each individual brings to their engagement on the issue. Respect for the specific time, energy, and experience of each person, while holding together the whole, is the bedrock of organizing. It is especially important as national "political brands" shape the language we use to communicate. People are at the heart of all effective movements and most would agree they have experienced distracting communication breakdowns.

If there is confusion in your organization, effectively engaging people to communicate with each other will take care of much heavy lifting on trying to "control the message". Control is an illusion and often alienates good people looking to lend a hand. Internal conflicts lead to confusion and hurt feelings as well as actively distract from the real work that brought everyone together. Screaming "You're focusing on the wrong thing!" can be equally disheartening to the people you need the most. Even if it is entirely true, tone, language and nuance can help empower people to navigate their own waters effectively.

As I've said many times, I'm newbie. I'm going to throw these concepts out there in the hope we can share experience to gain understanding and move forward. If you think I'm way off base, I'm willing to hear it. I share this information with the caveat that it isn't peer reviewed, double-blind tested, academically approved, or certified outside of my experience navigating the media world and the new political landscape for the past few months. I am simply taking my own advice and sharing what I know. I would love it if you took some time to review via your own efforts and tell me if it feels applicable. I know **Indivisible Women Nevada County** has been using these categories to help them express how they show up and communicate to good effect. If you think it might work for your organization feel free to adapt and share for your needs. If this proves helpful, I'll share concepts on dealing people "observing from the shore" in my next post.

**Read the descriptions below and let me know if they resonate for you or if there is something I should add. We all grow from teaching and learning. Thanks for letting me share.**



## Are you a Wader?

You are just dipping a toe in and figuring out if you fit into the movement calling you. You know you need to do something in this political climate but not sure what. You want to be the most effective you can be with clear limits to time and energy.

Perhaps you were a Swimmer or a Diver but circumstances have required you to take on a Wader role.

## **Specific Areas You Can Help:**

Daily calls to politicians or organizations asking for change or thanking them for support.

Discussing your involvement with friends and encouraging others to dip in.

Supporting Divers with specific needs like donations, call banks, voter registration, social media shares/comments and being an audience to bigger actions.

## **Leadership:**

There are leadership activities that require less time commitment. Go through your toolbox of skills and let your group know what you can offer: printing, fundraising, design, welcoming new members, sign making, childcare, art, writing etc. Channel your enthusiasm into skills that you already have. You'll feel better seeing things get done in a shorter amount of time, build connection through an existing passion and the rest of the group will appreciate the quick action.

## **Awareness:**

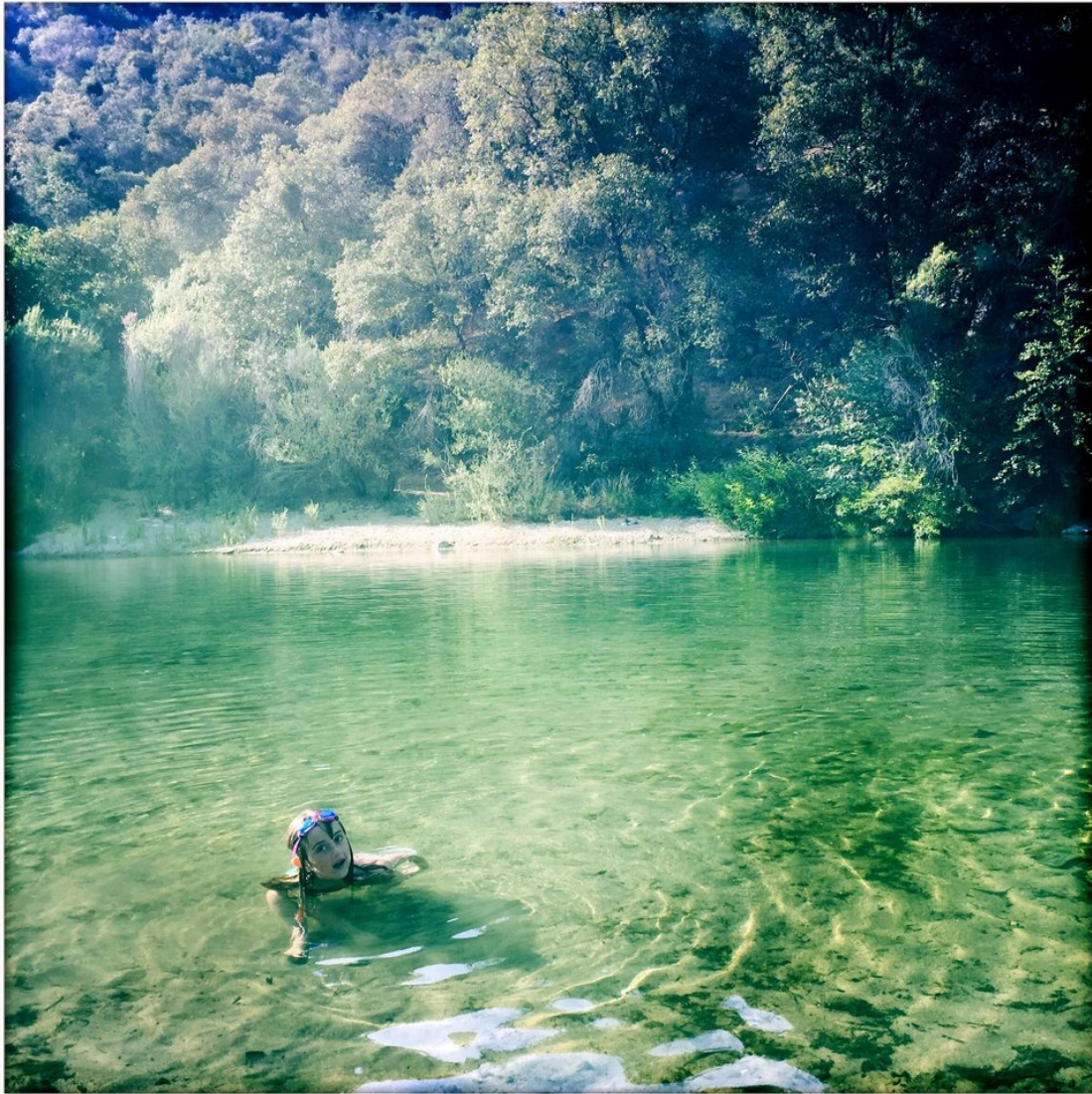
Be aware that enthusiasm ebbs and flows. Take breaks as needed. Learn to set a workable pace and adapt as you go.

Don't judge yourself or compare yourself to others. Limits to time and energy can feel frustrating. The group dynamic should feel supportive. If you are feeling judged, overwhelmed, or angered reach out to one or two like minds within instead of turning away. Let a Swimmer know you are struggling and ask for help setting a workable pace.

Understand the limits and challenges to Swimmer and Diver actions before signing up. We want everyone to be safe and healthy.

Be respectful of others' time as you learn without judgment. If something does not resonate for you and you would like to share feedback, do so with the understanding it is important to the person engaging in it. It may be her life's work.

If there is something you don't understand, ask for clarification or more reading. Sometimes it is great to ask in a public forum. Sometimes a more personal approach gets to deeper understanding. Often an innocent question sounds like an accusation when asked in social media or at an event. Dialogue and questions are great so be sure it is productive in order for you to get what you need to move forward. If it appears everyone knows what is going on and you aren't clear, ask privately for additional information so you can get up to speed at your own pace. Sometimes the rush of Swimmers and Divers feels like lack of consideration. It shouldn't feel personal but it often does.



## **Are You A Swimmer?**

You know how to hold your breath underwater and make it cross the pool! You have some training and expertise in the issues most important to you. Setting a pace for change comes a little easier as you've worked in activist roles before and understand you win some; you lose some. You have time to commit to showing up for political action but it can't be your full time job. Perhaps you'd like to do more but life circumstances and responsibilities require a clear limit to your engagement.

### **Specific Areas You Can Help:**

Onboarding and teaching new activists.

Creatively organizing "small bite" actions for Waders.

Creatively strategizing “big bite” action for Divers.  
You’re the middle child here; help hold the center together with respectful communication about the limits and challenges in each action.  
Model good boundaries and best practices for maintaining them in all your communications.

### **Leadership:**

You know your issues and effectively communicate when something big is bubbling up and when something should be kept on the radar at a marathon pace. You may have a specific story to share about how an issue is affecting you. Work on honing that and strategizing the best way to share it. If you don’t have a story, support someone who does. Recognize Waders looking to go deeper and help them set their own pace. Recognize when a Diver needs to get involved or needs help clarifying a position to the larger group. Don’t hesitate to contact them with clear solutions.

### **Awareness:**

Holding the middle can be an important challenge. Don’t feel compelled to take a Wader or Diver position if conflict comes up. There should be no judgment in the middle or at the edges. Know your limits of how much you can do and absorb. All the issues are important so take comfort in knowing you are part of a group with experts in each area. Save a little space to learn more to better inform your focus but don’t feel compelled to focus on it all. If you see some misinformation or would like to clarify an issue assess whether it is best discussed in public or private before responding with a goal towards deeper understanding. Often communicating in a broadcast fashion is less effective.

Be aware of your own oxygen as well as the Waders and Divers. You don’t want to throw someone into the deep end before they are ready, nor do you want to rip the oxygen mask off someone below sea. It often appears that Divers have gills, they don’t. They have their limits as well. If you have a concern please feel comfortable sharing but be aware a concern with a solution attached is always well received.



## Are you a Diver?

You've got all the gear, training, experience and skills to spend hours under water. Perhaps this is a lifetime of activism or perhaps you know you are called to make it a life. You are willing to actively engage in public action, travel great lengths to protest, run for office, create a foundation, put your life and body into this work that feels most important to you.

### Specific Areas You Can Help:

Creating events

Running for office

Communicating with national media and like minded organizations

Shaping message and strategy

## Rallying enthusiasm

### **Leadership:**

You can model and inspire others with your action. You can effectively communicate to large groups and at the national level. You represent the change we want to see in body and deed. Modeling how to be passionate about an issue, recover from setbacks and work with people who may not agree with you is key.

### **Awareness:**

Your commitment can inspire as well as intimidate. By no fault of your own, your choices may feel like judgment. Awareness that enthusiasm can create a rush of energy that sometimes blows past people is important. Invitations to engage are specifically challenging, as often the work you do isn't for everyone.

Consider how public communication and actions serve Waders and Swimmers as well. Please effectively communicate physical and legal risks attached to all your actions.

You may have been doing this a long time but there is always something new to learn. If your answer is "We've always done it this way", consider going deeper. Take time to communicate with Waders and Swimmers outside of large groups. Often people need a more personal invitation to engage. Your enthusiasm on an issue may feel like you are asking the group to agree with you. Consider how the goal of understanding plays a key role in the dynamic of this multifaceted group. Encourage others to stay within the group even if they disagree with something you are passionate about.