Agents of Change Report

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"The nature and structure of belief systems is important from the perspective of an informational theorist because beliefs are thought to provide the cognitive foundation of an attitude. In order to change an attitude, then, it is presumably necessary to modify the information on which that attitude rests. It is generally necessary, therefore, to change a person's beliefs, eliminate old beliefs or introduce new beliefs."

— Richard Petty and John Cacioppo

Summary

During the period July 23rd - August 3rd, Village Seed Solutions embarked on a very daring project called the Agents of Change summer camp. With the help of Social Innovation Generation, BG Group, Demming Communications, Unit Trust and other corporate citizens we were able to host a summer camp for 19 Boys aged 15-20.

Imagine a camp that taught young people to think differently, solve problems and see the world as a system. Agents of Change took participants on a journey in which they learned tools and skills of Creative Problem Solving. Participants were asked to apply these tools within a particular problem domain of Education, Environment or Crime. Using the tools and skills taught in the program, participants developed their own innovations. Content for the camp was informed by topics such as Design Thinking, Systems Thinking, Ecology and Theories of Change.

thing that is reserved for a select few. In our discussions, we concluded that Leadership and Change could occur from anywhere and from anyone in a system. Building on these insights, we asked ourselves:

"What would happen if you gave a group of young people tools to change the world? What could they accomplish with just a little bit of knowledge and new ways of thinking? What could happen if we taught them how to think differently? Think with a problem-solving mind."

To address this question, we decided to design a program, or course for participants that would teach them skills around navigating complex environments. The program would be designed to focus on providing participants with skills, tools and resources around systems thinking, creative problem solving and disruptive thinking. The hope was that participants would be able to use these skills in multiple contexts in ways that matter to them.

Background

The idea for the Agents of Change camp emerged from a series of conversations at Village Seed Solutions. We were discussing the notion that change is not a grandiose

Program format and outline

The program began with facilitators and participants introducing themselves. Participants and facilitators co-developing ground rules. After which, participants were then introduced to a teambuilding exercise that also introduced some of the ideas of Design Thinking and Systems Thinking.

Day two began with trust building and teambuilding as an introduction into understanding personality. Participants were then lead through a model of personality identification, in which they learned about and explored their own and others personalities and traits. Participants learned how their personality works and how to work with personalities that were very different from their own.

On the third day participants were introduced to the concept of Leadership and Leadership from anywhere in a system. The rest of the camp consisted of a mix of learning about, and learning how to apply Systems Thinking and Design Thinking.

The most challenging part of the camp was that participants were asked to use the techniques taught in the program to present their ideas or innovations that would shift the system or domain they were working in.

On the penultimate day of the camp, participants presented their Social Innovations that they thought would greatly improve wicked problems of Education, Crime and the Environment.

The final day of the camp consisted of a debrief day. Although the day was framed as a field trip, facilitators and participants discussed how participants might use these change tools after the camp, and the kinds of challenges that they may face. This time was also used to get feedback on how participants thought the camp went.

Program components

Starting from where you are - Exploring self

The component starting from self introduced participants to the idea that change can only start from where you are. In order to start from where you are, participants needed to delve into understanding who they were. On the second day of the program, participants spent time exploring their personality, their trends and their sense of self. Using various personality tools, reflection, and dialogue, participants explored their sense of self.

Systems thinking

System thinking is a powerful way of thinking about and understanding the world. System thinkers look at the connections, interactions and relationships between parts of a system. Systems thinking can be viewed as a tool or language that helps people navigate stubborn problems. System thinking helps participants:

1. Identify intervention points.
2. Think and look at problems with an eye towards the long view.
3. Discover potential tipping points.
4. Engage in more effective problem solving.
5. Improve their Leadership.
6. Understand the concept of limits to growth and sustainability.
7. Improve communications by helping participants think about communication within all parts of a system.
8. See the big picture, (i.e. separate the forest from the trees).
9. Learn how to challenge and rethink mental models.
10. Understand that cause and effect are not always closely related in time and space.
11. See the world as being deeply interconnected.
12. Learn how to identify high and low leverage points.
13. Identify when agents in a system are causing their own problems but, blame is elsewhere.

In the Agents of Change Summer Camp facilitators lead activities through games, play and conversations. Participants learned through activities and games that encouraged teamwork, conversations and dialogue. In debriefing, facilitators used the activities as a way of highlighting various concepts around systems thinking.

Design Thinking

Design thinking can be thought of as a set of principles, a mindset or a process that can be applied to solve complex problems. In the Agents of Change Summer Camp participants were taken though a process of solving difficult problems. This process can be applied to any tough problem they encounter. The hope is that they will be able to apply these processes in other areas of their lives.

Applying learning's by Designing a Social innovation

With the guidance of facilitators, participants applied the tools and techniques of Systems Thinking and Design Thinking to a real world problem.

Evaluations

Through focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews, a few trends emerged:

1. Participants seemed to understand the principles of systems thinking.
2. Participants indicated that they placed high value on an approach to learning that placed them as active learners. A sharp contrast to learning in which they are the passive receivers of information.
3. Participants enjoyed the personality exercises introduced to them during the camp. Many indicated that it helped them to better understand and negotiate both team and family dynamics.
4. Many of participants indicated that even though the topics were difficult, facilitators did a good job of helping them understand concepts that would have otherwise seem inacessible.
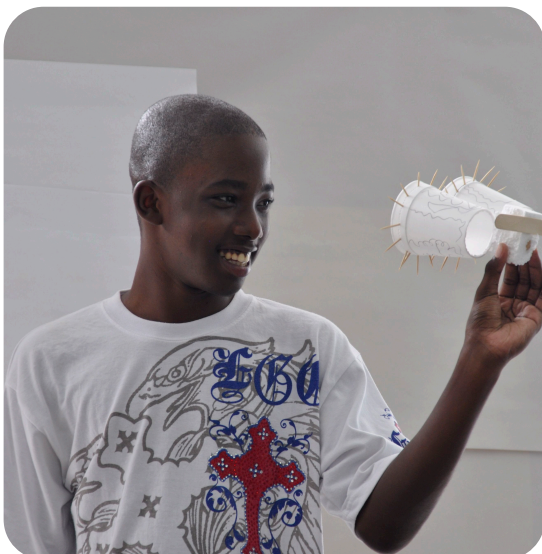
5. Participants admitted that although they did find it difficult at times, they placed value on being given the challenge of trying to come up with an innovation within a particular problem domain.
6. Participants indicated that their expectation of a boring encounter was quickly dispelled and they enjoyed the experience.

Evaluation of Social Innovation challenge

- Innovations demonstrated an understanding of interventions that shift entire systems.
- Participants seemed to understand concepts like mental models, rule bending, balancing loops, reinforcing loops, mutual interdependence and unintended consequences.
- Demonstrated that participants understood the value of higher level systems interventions.
- On several occasions participants found the challenge to be difficult. The deep insight here was that many of the participants expressed reasons for finding the challenge difficult demonstrated that they understood the complexity of the problem.

- Participants reasons for finding the challenge to difficult included: fixes can backfire, them asking the question are we shifting the burden and tragedy of the commons.
- When participants presented their innovations many of them referenced an understanding of usual systems thinking traps or follies like systems can backfire, ensuring that they were not shifting the burden, looking for balancing and reinforcing loops and looking for strategic partnerships.

Opportunities

1. We can consider including females as the assumption was that our young males are the ones under threat, however, this may have been a gender biased assumption and as such there is an opportunity to include females which can add an element of diversity to the camp.
2. There is an opportunity to build capacity amongst participants who have graduated through the program. We have been considering the possibility that participants could move on to be facilitators and educators of systems thinking, design and social innovation. There is considerable opportunity to thinking about designing a program that trains trainers who could deliver the camp to a community of their peers.
3. As a result of this camp, we have developed a curriculum on System Thinking, Design Thinking and Creative Problem solving. This curriculum could serve as a great resource for other youth programs, or as a starting point for beginning to think about how this curriculum could be combined with other programs like, sports, arts, theatre, music, spoken word etc.…
4. One of the models we have played with in a partnership relationship with Social Innovation Generation is having youth workers participate in the program with participants. This approach educates both the participants and their youth workers. There is a great opportunity to use programs like these to introduce an adult population of youth workers to concepts like System Thinking, Design Thinking and Creative Problems solving.
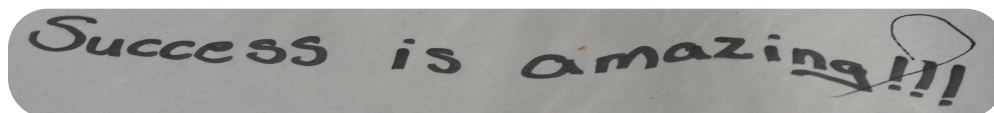
Lessons Learned.

- The length of this pilot version was 10 days, however, coming out of the experience maybe we can shorten to 5 days with the 6th day being the field trip. This is to ensure that we keep the participants engaged and ensure there is no lack of motivation over the time period.
- Lunch served as a very important bonding and learning moment for participants.
- Young adults can learn and apply systems thinking to various problems domains.
- Entering this educational experience we thought we were going to be teaching about system thinking, design thinking and social innovation. After the camp we realized that many of the participants found the experience of being in a learning centered environment to be transformative. On the final day of the program, participants gave presentations on the innovations they developed. Two parents and the principal of a few of the participants commented on how they saw a great improvement in the confidence of many of the participants. Sometimes, giving young people attention might be enough for them to have a transformative experience.

Recommendations.

- Develop a method for tracking the progress of the participants.
- Engage SIG to assist with the training of 10 camp facilitators.
- Use this core team as team leaders to roll out 4 camps in different geographical areas.
- Shorten the time frame of the camp

Future questions

1. Can we teach participants Systems Thinking?
2. What did we learn as Agents of Change Facilitators?
3. What did we learn from participants?
4. How can we improve the curriculum for future iterations of the program?
5. What are some of the suggested next steps for the Agents of Change curriculum?
6. Is it irresponsible to teach change techniques and skills and then send participants into an environment that does not support their potential agency?
7. What resources can we use that can enhance the program?
8. Who can we partner with to extend the program?
9. How can we make lunch time a relaxed learning period?

Success is amazing!!!

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