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“ I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I will not refuse to do the something I can do.” Helen Keller

The Influence of One “Outside” Person On Services

It is quite common for many people to become quite distressed at how unresponsive service agencies can be. This not only includes advocates, service users and others who are closely involved, it may also arise from people functioning within these systems. This paper will look principally at the person situated on the “outside”, and a selection of the types and degree of influence roles they can play. These roles of influence often overlap, and it is not unusual for persistent change agents to pursue various of these at different times in line with their personal priorities and aptitudes.

It is tempting in taking up this prospect of there being some degree of potential for personal influence, to grant to individuals powers that are often more potently expressed in groups. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that, even in groups, it often comes down to the will and action of a mere handful of people as to whether progress is made. The starting point for catalyzing the “many” always begins with the “few”. In turn, the gathering of the few is always begun by the actions of one.

The Creation of An Improved Vision

If one traces back so many changes to their origins, it is commonly true that the change was only possible because the vision that upheld the status quo was challenged or replaced by a rival vision. If there is no one who takes the time to build and communicate an alternative vision, it is no wonder that people stay with what they know. However, it is also remarkable how easily an entirely new vision is adopted once people have had a chance to be exposed to and persuaded by the merits of a new vision. “Vision building” is actually an ongoing process, but it does matter that at each point there are people at work on improving our sense of what is good, desirable and practical. With a solid vision, we are that much better armed for the struggle of change.

Questioning Today’s Established “Answers”

Though it may seem a small point, it is important to appreciate that the poor habits and practices of today can only be replaced when people decide they are not satisfied with what they see today. At the same time, if people are unable to question what is presented to them by apparent authorities as being “necessary”, then much of what is presently in place will endure unchallenged. Long before people begin to question the authorities in an outright manner, they often spend quite a bit of time wondering to themselves whether they should continue to accept things simply on trust. As the doubts mount, so too does their conviction that things are not what they should be. Knowing this dynamic, it is always useful to encourage “sensible doubting”, as it begins the long process towards improvement. This initial period of questioning lays the foundation for practical and needed reforms, by opening us up to possibilities that would not have been imaginable if we took the status quo at face value.

Offering or Denying Affirmation and Legitimacy

Whenever we go along with things, we send the message that everything is acceptable. Social institutions can only function if they can maintain their credibility. Service organizations are no different. If the people who are supposed to benefit from these bodies, such as the people who receive or rely on services, refuse to publicly grant to them the credibility and legitimacy they need, then their withholding of affirmation becomes a powerful weapon to bring about change. From a crisis of legitimacy comes the mandate for solutions. These same bodies constantly use service users and ordinary citizens as spokespeople for their policies and priorities because they very much know that this creates the respectability they need. Quiet, unchallenging and compliant citizens are perfect for keeping these bodies unchanged. Citizens who visibly withhold their affirmation of these bodies may actually turn out to be the very catalysts that are needed for change.

The Creation of Empowered Roles For Citizens

It is really no surprise that citizens do not have influence on services if services only grant to them largely disempowered roles such as serving on (powerless) advisory bodies, occupying only nominally influential board positions, and participation in minor administrative processes. This lack of empowerment is even more certain to be the case if citizens do not pursue the creation of more powerful official roles for themselves that have real clout and meaty tasks. These more substantial sorts of roles typically involve delegated governance powers, as opposed to toothless advisory powers. This need not make ordinary citizens managers of these systems but it would mean that they are actual rather than token partners in the core operating decisions. After all, advice is something that the recipient usually does not have to take. Opinion that has to

be indisputably taken into account is a much more empowered option for ordinary people in regards to influencing services.

Independent Monitoring and Watchdog

It may not seem influential while it is happening, but keeping a constant eye on what the system or program is up to, is a fundamental step towards ensuring it is the right or best thing. It is from the insights gained from this sort of activity that all crucial areas of progress will evolve as priorities. It is by getting closer to seeing what is actually needed by people that good priorities will develop. Whenever people take systems uncritically on face value, they are already shortchanging themselves. Systems tend to believe in their own version of reality, and may unwittingly, or even consciously, suppress views to the contrary. They also tend to behave themselves better when they know they are being watched and will have to answer for their conduct. So, it is the interests of citizens to keep their eye on what is or is not actually happening.

Building Awareness and Understanding

It is too much to expect people who are unfamiliar with what is possible to be steadfast in implementing what they do not yet grasp or support. For the astute change agent this means the acceptance of the fact that education precedes action and that mindfulness requires that the mind of the person is engaged. All this means that the change agent must make peace with the necessity to work very hard at seeing that understanding be gradually built amongst people, inside and outside of the system, of what might be a better way to proceed. This is greatly aided when the person doing the educating is persuasively educated and open to being so. It also helps if they appreciate the need and responsibility for them to become gradually more persuasive and convincing. In time, from liberated minds will come the possibility of liberated lives.

Seeking and Promoting Innovations

It is when our inspirations begin to get translated into promising small examples that we cross the threshold into actual innovation. Even the tiniest of positive examples, once materialized into a concrete instance, sets the stage for an even greater number and quality of subsequent innovations. These are the “corners” that once turned; set us all off in a new direction. Many refurbished “old” ideas are often held up as being innovations when in reality they are more of the same. So, seeking the truth about what is an authentic and valuable innovation is part and parcel of the kind of groundbreaking that helps all of us to get out of the status quo. Of course, not all things that are

innovative produce wholesome results, as there are many ultimately perverse innovations that began their career invested with great promise, hope and glamour. Nevertheless, we need innovation, and the innovation minded people that help create these.

Creating Alliances for Change

It has long been true that no person is an island. Ultimately we are social in nature, and our social institutions only yield to change when sufficient forces are massed for this purpose. The coming together of like-minded people underlies much of this change. The forming, by careful and deliberate action, of alliances for change is always at the heart of the strategies that have made individual change agents successful. When the change process can move from “I” to “we”, then the number of change agents increases and so do the fruits of their efforts. This process is “alliance building” and may involve allies from both outside and inside the system. As committed people struggle, perhaps along both separate and overlapping pathways, towards a shared vision, a kind of momentum builds. The collective effect this produces would not be possible if people did not unite their efforts via formal and informal alliances. From one comes two, from two comes four, and so on as a social movement becomes apparent.

Maintaining Pressure and Priority

It would be a very desirable world if all we had to do was to step forward, make our case, and then sit back and expectantly await the changes we demanded. However, it is rarely that simple. Our social institutions and the authorities that manage them are constantly beset by a steady and unrelenting set of vested interests and pressures that do not promptly yield to the merits of reason and rationality. On the contrary, reason alone is insufficient in order to prevail in the practical politics of change. The more effective actors recognize that they must not only have a good case, they must also be able to mobilize important constituencies in order to make the case a priority. Had they carefully built and educated the necessary alliances that would underpin this mobilization, then their chances of success are heightened. However, even with a good base of support, it is important to realize that this will be constantly tested and thus pressure may not only need to be mounted, it often needs to be sustained for long periods during adverse times.

Investing In Leadership

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Leadership is not a specific trait in people such that either one has “it” or not. There is no such thing as a general “all purpose” leader. On the contrary elements of leadership may exist in many people, at least in regards to some of their potential capacities to make a degree of change possible. Investing in the identification, recruitment, encouragement and development of this latent capacity is extremely useful. This is because these people, usually in their “small” and particular ways become catalysts for change. All this potential would be wasted if leadership was not asked from and stimulated in people. Helping people see and respond to the many “leadership challenges” that exist, is a very influential strategy and role, just as ignoring it is usually very costly to one’s prospects. The good news is that cultivating leadership is itself quite a practical possibility and it has the added advantage of engaging people in discerning and acting upon the leadership missions their emerging vision creates.

The Limits of One Person

It is all too obvious that a sole person is no match for an entrenched institution. Like “death and taxes”, our social institutions tend to precede and succeed us. However, it is important to see that they don’t do so unchanged. Everyday, often obscure “small” people help to fundamentally confront and change all manner of aspects of these institutions. They are by no means omnipotent nor inevitably successful. However, it would be very unfair and unwise to conclude that because they are often stymied, outflanked or defeated that they are without influence. These defeats and discouragements are real enough, but undue attention on these setbacks may take the attention away from what the target of their efforts is now doing.

All too often the service has changed, and it is rare that they admit or acknowledge this and that this result came about because of citizen action. Yet a careful study of the record will reveal that citizen action very much remains a viable, necessary and influential factor in how these organizations behave. The independence, freedom and transforming power of even a single citizen should not be underestimated. There have simply been too many that have prevailed against improbable odds. However, anyone seeking to influence services should not underestimate the depth and difficulties of the struggle. Neither should they let these hardships define them or their sense of what could some day be possible. It will often come to be.

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