

Co-Creating and Collaborating

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

Many of us would have heard about the need to prepare for a future that seems to have more complex problems and challenging dynamics. The complexity and fast pace of change is a result of a host of reasons and dimensions, from the impact of climate change on livestock, livelihood and businesses, to more transactional types of relationships, to the stress and strain of compliance framework in services. These projections about the future mean that organisations and practitioners have to depend more on cross-disciplinary collaborations, flattened hierarchies and working with communities in order to evolve and co-create solutions.

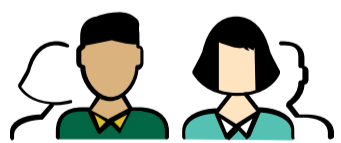
Learning Together

As a society, we need to be lifelong learners in order to stay relevant, competent and participative. Better still, we need to master new skills and envision new possibilities. This is what Workforce Singapore hopes to achieve through their programmes and initiatives. The big vision is for people to absorb knowledge and skills and to create new knowledge while learning.

Groups or micro communities are often the primary vehicle for learning. Creating new knowledge and developing new products often happen when people work together or in a collective learning context. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is an example of such collective learning. The purpose of working together is to expand knowledge and expertise and to possibly create what is useful so that organisations, communities, customers and citizens can benefit or be better served.

What Makes this Work

What makes such teams or groups work are the relationships and bonds that are formed around a shared mission. Having a common goal fosters mutual support for each other even as people gather. Collective learning often requires adapting to a more freestyle and less controlling style of doing things and requires teams to work together to carry out interdependent tasks in order to problem solve and create new solutions. The group dynamics include listening to other points of views, coordinating actions and making shared decisions. It requires every person in the group to remain mindfully aware of other's needs, roles and perspectives, and to actively use feeling and thinking skills in engaging each other.



For such group learning to happen, there are some activities and conditions that must exist. These include leaders facilitating and enabling each group member through a supportive environment that place priority on partnerships. Leaders also play a big part in framing in order to promote effective collaboration and learning. What undergirds the environment is a safe interpersonal environment and psychological safety that promotes the attitudes, skills and behaviours necessary for meaningful learning. Framed as learning, what seems like failure and disappointments become lessons in inquiry and potential for development.

Be it multi-disciplinary teams or community groups, the lifespan of the group will depend on the extent of the relationship to be fostered and the nature of the problem or solution at hand. Furthermore, the decision on whether to take an issue or solution further belongs to the group.

Contributions from Social Work Training



For social workers, our training in community and group work equips us with the knowledge and skills required for making learning together work. Social work training equips social workers in how to work in multi-disciplinary teams, across disciplines and with diverse communities. Good social workers have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they present themselves. The basics of group work apply, such as recognising and clarifying interdependence, establishing trust and figuring out how to coordinate well. Offering to share crucial knowledge in a timely way and learning to ask open ended questions clearly and frequently make for good teamwork.

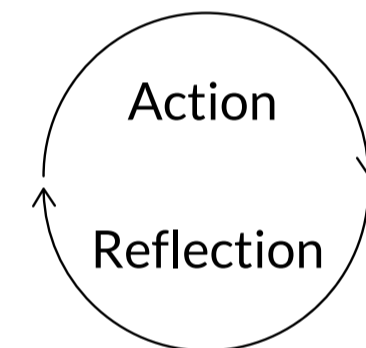
Co-Creating Solutions with Communities



Organising people to learn together is helpful when working with communities to solve problems or to further improve conditions. This is because each person, group of people or community learns through the discussions and derives their own understanding of the situation or problem in order to organise or create a solution. For example, with the number of old persons in society on the rise, there will be an increasing number of needs that can be met by local communities more speedily and creatively as compared to government agencies. Neighbourhoods, towns and informal groups should come together to discuss these needs and what they can do to have a town that caters to a group of people with diverse ages, life styles and needs.

When people gather, those affected have a voice in coming up with a solution, and they have greater courage to move ahead even without great certainty. This is a process of action and reflection. When working with communities to improve conditions or solve problems, the following can help to generate an enabling and supportive environment:

- asking questions
- sharing information
- experimenting with jointly created actions or possibility
- talking about mistakes and learning together
- seeking feedback.



We should nurture an atmosphere where questions are asked in a curious sort of way and not perceived as interrogative. Good questions can deepen understanding, open up possibilities and clarify interpretation and perception.

Goal of Learning Together

Moving forward, it is likely that we will be engaged in more collaborations and work with other disciplines or communities. We must be ready as social service professionals to be able to facilitate such group work in order to achieve more contextualised solutions, greater knowledge sharing and client-centric services.

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