

CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE

The Story of the North Queensland Every Step Program: a leadership and team development program

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"I felt quite anxious about being with this group of which some people I'd briefly met, but mostly had never met. Feeling as negative and overwhelmed by my work, I thought - what on earth would they think of me? In the first hour I sat quietly and was thinking, why am I here, should I be here, is this going to be worth all of these months of this travel and time? Then as a group we started talking and sharing our stories and I could hear my feelings being told all around the room by people I did not know. How did they know I felt like this... perhaps they feel like I do. It was the most amazing ½ hour I had experienced in my working life for a long time. I almost felt relieved that these people felt as bad as I did. Sad but true. I was getting connected."

Every Step Participant

Every Step is a prototype program designed to create opportunities for personal, organisational and systemic change in the early childhood sector. It is grounded in the U process originated by Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski and Otto Scharmer. This process is a methodology for addressing highly complex challenges- for solving complex problems or realising complex opportunities. This process is a 'social technology' which positions Every Step programs to effect transformation within and across early childhood settings.

In using the U process, Every Step participants undertake three activities or movements: sensing the current reality of the system of which they are part, carefully and in depth; making present their inner knowledge and reflecting on what is going on and what they have to do; and then realising, acting swiftly to bring forth the reality they wish to see.

In the Every Step program the U process commenced with pre session interviews so that all participants could begin the sensing process. These interviews were conducted by the facilitators who at this point begin to engage participants in the process of reflecting on and making present their inner knowledge of themselves, their organisation and their sector. Gaining commitment from participants at this point for participating fully in an ongoing learning process as opposed to a series of training sessions from which one could pick and choose, was significant in the overall success of the Every Step experience for participants.

Every Step grounded as it is in U process meant that learning processes were established so that an iterative cycle of sensing, presencing and realising occurred in each formal session as well as between sessions. Participants were equipped broadly with an understanding of action learning rather than the formal language of the U process. As well participants were introduced to a repertoire of strengths-based, appreciative and inclusive participatory models and tools which equipped them better to understand and negotiate the U process at a person, team, organisational and learning cohort level. These models and processes included but were not limited to; open space technology, asset based community development, appreciative inquiry, most significant change evaluation, action learning, action research, focused conversations, world café, strategic planning and the art of the powerful question.

The Every Step program gave participants in the realising phase the opportunity to move to performance and action as a collective and to act in 'communion' regarding their ongoing products and processes. In general the use of the U process in the Every Step program has produced results at three scales:

In the capacities- the thinking and acting of the leaders who participated in the program,

In the relationships amongst them, and
In the performance of them as an Every Step team. The impact this group began to have at the sector level in North Queensland was discernible as well.

Because the program commenced with interviews and the introductory sessions involved lots of small group, one to one, whole group sensing and presencing dialogue, deep changes in the relationships among participants occurred quickly and they were able to understand what was possible and what the Every Step team cared about.

It was also very important that the Every Step participants acknowledged that they felt 'burned out' and 'over being in the sector'. These leaders felt negative and deeply dissatisfied by their experiences within the early childhood sector. It began to emerge for participants that they were not alone in feeling this way; that they did have the capacity to change things for themselves, their organisation or the sector. They also began to understand that they could do this at any level if they could develop their capacity to work together with significant others in their 'systems.'

The results of the Every Step program can best be seen in the many seeds it planted and nurtured. These seeds included:

Participants who completed the program with a sense of efficacy and effectiveness in their own personal and organisational work;

Participants who have evolved a network to support and assist other networks in order to enhance sustainable, life-affirming early childhood sector professionals;

Successful Every Step projects such as Learning and Development Policy and Procedures Manuals, Significant Change DVD and Positive Image of the Sector DVD with accompanying workshop outlines;

Professional development and learning partnerships led by Centres in conjunction with other contributors to the sector including Inclusion Support Agencies as well as Workforce Council through the PSCQ.

Phases and Process

We have discussed the use of U process as an underpinning technology and as a framework for the Every Step prototype program. The next section of this paper discusses the phases of the program and how it contributes to our understanding of what works and what doesn't work in leadership development and transformational change processes.

In this Every Step program a diverse group of leaders from different parts of a poorly performing [in their view] sector worked together to shift the sector [within their reach]. Their work as a learning cohort consisted of four phases: convening and then using a collective version of the U process to undertake co-sensing, co-presencing and co-realising.

"We listened, we shared, and we learned, we focused, we committed and we left ready to take a step forward." Every Step Participant

Convening

The participants of the Every Step program did not know what they were signing up for. They did know that change was needed even if initially it was only change in themselves and how they viewed their world. In the convening phase they [as leaders of different parts of the system] came to understand that change was needed, and that they could not effect that change alone. They talked with each other and the facilitators firstly one on one, then in small groups about what was happening and what was needed. These thoughtful, heartfelt and focused conversations served both to crystallise the purpose of the Every Step program and also who needed to be involved in the broader learning and development work so that the program could achieve its purpose.

The primary result of the convening phase is that the Every Step program participants became a change team. The concept of a change team in the Every Step process is this- a group of 25 or so leaders of a system [or sector] who together are a microcosm of that system[or sector] and who are committed to changing it – and critically, who are open to changing themselves.

“This started right from the first day when we all got together and the stories naturally started flowing in the group – this was done in an informal way and on a relaxed level. It became clear that there were significant stories to be told – we were wise women we did have the answers within us – We were not alone we were connected.”

Every Step Participant

Phase One: Co- Sensing- uncovering current reality

It is impossible to address transformational change and leadership by tinkering at the edges. In this phase of Every Step the change team [Every Step participants] learn to see the system as a whole. The Every Step program creates a space for participants to see the whole of the system as well as become conscious of their own filters. During this phase the participants undertake a series of workshops that introduce them to the concepts and processes outlined earlier. An intended outcome of these sessions is that they get connected to each other as well as to the work of building their own individual and collective capacities.

The participants begin to construct a map of their reality of the sector and decide on which aspects of the sector they need to learn more about [their learning agenda]. For this group this included:

- How to attract and retain quality staff,
- How to support staff with quality learning and development,
- How to enhance the image of the sector,
- How to create sustainable networks of early childhood professionals.

These early workshops also build the capacity of the team to work together effectively through challenging and stretching processes of personal, team and organisational change. Participants also undertake to learn more about different perspectives from their own staff, stakeholders and communities. These learning processes deepen the participants’ consciousness of their own filters and the inner work that is needed. The primary result of the sensing phase is a deep shared understanding among participants of the current reality of the whole early childhood sector.

“I am a valued member of the village and of the sector. We can be the change, we have the tools!” *Every Step Participant*

Co- Presencing – Retreating and Reflecting

Earlier in the Every Step program participants uncover the current reality of the system as a whole. In the co-presencing phase they go further and uncover a deeper understanding about what is going on in the system, their role in it and what they individually and collectively being called upon to do.

Most of us are trained to objectify problems and systems as something separate and distinct from ourselves. In this way we forget that we are very much an active part of the systems we’re trying to change. In the Every Step program participants are challenged to open up to their role in the system of which they are part and to reflect on the powerful questions their own life, their organisation and the early childhood system is asking them to consider.

This is difficult to practice in daily life. Most of the things in our environment overwhelm our capacity to reflect and be fully present. Therefore, the Every Step program creates a space and holds it for participants to learn how to reflect as well as begin some of the inner ‘mindfulness’

work needed to lead transformative change. The term presencing comes from the intention to be fully present. As the authors of 'Presence' explain 'it is about becoming totally present to the larger space or field around us, to an expanded sense of self , and ultimately to what is emerging through us. Once we have achieved that stance as individuals and as a team, moving up the U involves acting in the service of bringing that emerging reality into being.' (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers 2007).

This phase in the Every Step program corresponds to the bottom of the U. Passing through it; the acquired knowledge of the previous phase emerges in an inner clarity, which becomes applied learning in the projects and activities of the last phase. The primary result of the presencing phase of Every Step is the deep clarity and commitment in the Every Step team as to what needs to be done so that new realities are created in the domains of personal, organisational and sector change.

Participants of the Every Step program often commented that the sessions allowed them to connect more deeply with each other, with the work they were doing and with their own individual and collective sense of purpose and commitment. Without effort conversations turned quickly to acknowledgement of the trust that was building and the good will that was forming. This allowed participants to maintain connectedness between sessions and to 'deep dive' into process in the actual workshop sessions.

Co-realising – enacting a new reality

The final phase of the Every Step program is both familiar and unfamiliar. Here participants are making concrete what has been learned by doing projects and activities together that enact the changes they want to see and to be.

In the program this is where the Every Step Evaluation story and its accompanying DVD; the Positive Image of the Sector DVD and its accompanying workshop session outline; the Learning and Development Policy, Procedure and Guideline Folder as well as the Early Childhood Professional Association and Network come to life.

By this time of co-realising the Every Step team has gone through a deep process of co-sensing and co-presencing, which means that they have arrived as TS Eliot would say, at a familiar place and know it for the first time.

Throughout this phase the different initiative teams are sharing their learnings and progress with each other and are in fact peer coaching and peer reviewing. During this phase the Every Step teams brought in the missing competencies, relationships and resources they needed to augment their team. This gave these teams a lived experience of successful, innovative and creative work beyond the experiences their current workplaces provided. As demonstrated in their celebration session they were able to successfully plan, host and celebrate 'as one' the achievements of the various teams.

The primary result of this phase of the Every Step program is a set of products that can be used and owned by the participants of Every Step. As well this complements the other primary result of an enhanced sense of achievement and confidence in the ability to do different things and to do things differently. These combined are the major outcomes of the Every Step program.

The Role of the Facilitator

The Every Step facilitator is competent and skilled in the U process as well as leadership and change theory and practice. The facilitator is a competent practitioner in all tools, methodologies and processes outlined earlier in this report. These processes complement the phases of the program with appreciative, participative, strengths-based skill development. The facilitators have a leading role in the areas of skill development and group dynamic. They have a guiding and enabling role in the participant's inner work, the team /organisational work being undertaken at

workplaces as well as the Change team work that occurs in the later stages of the program. When this work is underway the role of the facilitator subtly shifts to one of coaching and support as the team creates its own energy and its own momentum.

Why do we need Every Step programs?

Every Step programs translate theory into practice in ways that encourage learners to apply insight at personal, organisational and system/sector levels. Every Step programs intentionally create a space or environment deliberately to foster a particular type of learning. In these spaces Every Step participants may require intellectual and sensory stimulation, where new knowledge and information is being acquired. At other times Every Step participants may require a quiet and reflective space where they can make sense of inner thoughts and feelings. In still another space Every Step participants will require a busy, interactive creative innovative space for project work where crystallising, prototyping and enacting ideas is taking place.

The Every Step program intentionally seeks to build skills and capacities for regeneration, hence the focus on inclusive appreciative participatory tools, processes and models. The Every Step program meets participants 'where they are' and starts from that point. The rest becomes the group's process of developing a practice for personal, organisational and sector regeneration.

In conclusion the Every Step program prototype created shared learning within which highly diverse individuals became capable of operating in unity. This mode of operation allowed them to share what each of them knew, so that together they could see the whole early childhood system and their roles in enacting it. This capacity to see the sector as a whole enabled extraordinary effective individual and effective leadership in the small container called Every Step North Queensland. From this place of greater clarity and connection the group of participants was able to change habit, change custom and ultimately along with other emerging leaders change the culture and practice of the early childhood sector.

"I cannot begin to explain the changes I have seen in myself and this group of child care workers who have undertaken the ES training – it is amazing to be part of a group that has embraced the changes, albeit personal, professional or organisational and be able to move forward with such positive results. This training has not only changed people's perspective of themselves, but has had far reaching affects for each and every individual on a professional level, for the betterment of the child care industry."
Every Step Participant

"A profound change commitment and passion came to the forefront and negativity was gone."
Every Step Participant

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