



**Communication  
for  
Change**

Enabling people to help themselves

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## Enabling people to help themselves

Bringing about a change in the health and nutrition practices of the community often requires fundamental changes in people's attitudes. Cultural beliefs and taboos may keep them from adopting new habits or ideas that could greatly improve their life conditions. This is particularly true if people have long been apathetic, dependent on outside directives or resistant to new ideas.

Experience shows that in such situations merely imparting information does not motivate people. They have to be so involved as to develop in them a genuine sense of commitment to change, to adopt new practices and find solutions of themselves. In other words, they have to experience participatory learning.

Thus, it is very important for you to know how people look at their own problems – indeed, whether they think a particular situation is problematic at all. It will take you time, sensitive listening and building of trust to appreciate people's perceptions of their own problems.

You, as a Health Worker, are an agent of change. To bring about a change in people's thinking, you need to know how people actually feel about things and how they look at their own problems. Often we make the



Living with the people to learn about community

error of looking, at people's situation. For example, it may appear very obvious to you that the reason why children fall ill frequently is the lack of cleanliness in the surroundings, and you may feel that the people of the community should be able to keep the area clean. Yet, if this is not happening, there must be some reason for it. If you do not look at this problem from the people's angle, then you are likely to get irritated at them. But if you do make the effort of discussing this issue with them, you may become aware of aspects you had not thought of, which will explain why the surroundings are not clean.

When you are working with people, your aim should be to develop confidence and skills in them, so that they can help themselves.

To enable people to help themselves you need to

- Establish a good relationship with them
- Communicate clearly
- Encourage people's participation and
- Avoid prejudices and biases
- Let us study each of these aspects

### Establishing a Good Relationship

**You have to have a good relationship with those you want to help.** If people tend to like you, trust you and if they feel comfortable with you, then they are more likely to believe what you say and your task becomes easier.

You can get people to trust you if you respect them and their beliefs, and listen to them and encourage them to develop their own strengths.

Your own personality and actions influence the way people look at you and think about you. This affects the type of relationship you have with people in the community. If you observe or you are informed that there are some aspects of your personality that worry/irritate/are not liked by people, you should make an effort to modify yourself so that your credibility goes up.

### How to establish a good relationship

If you wish to establish a good rapport with people, they must see you at work. You must do things that people believe are useful and



beneficial for them. You should listen to people, show concern about their needs and problems and always be available to give help when people need it.

While working with the community, you must explain your job to the people and learn about their work. Interact with group leaders, influential health/social welfare workers. Create an environment such that people can realize what they can do to help themselves. This will raise self-esteem, and they will feel better about themselves as well as appreciate your concern for their welfare. This will help your relationship to improve.

### **Encouraging Participation**

Participation by the people in solving their own problems is the key to success.

**Participation is necessary at every step from identifying problems to solving them.**

Why is participation important? People like to be responsible for their decisions. You, as an agent of change, can only help and guide the people in finding solutions to their problems but you cannot take direct responsibility. For example, if the community does not have good water supply, you can neither provide them money nor dig the well yourself, but at the same time you can organize people in a way that they can procure the necessary help in terms of money, manpower and other resources to dig a well-protected well/source of water supply.

In the course of work, you will find many opportunities when your encouragement to people to help them would be essential to improve their living conditions. Participation by the people is essential at all stages of solving a problem as the following discussion brings out.

#### **i) Participation in identifying problems**

You would be making a big mistake if you tell the community "I know what your main problems are". No doubt that you would be able to see the problems and analyse the reasons for the same *but until* the concerned people see that there is a problem, they cannot be interested in solving it. Instead, your statements such as above may make the people angry, if you assume that you know all about their lives.

The best strategy is thus to encourage people to identify their own problems and show an interest in helping them solve it. This will help build trust and strengthen relationships.

#### **ii) Participation in finding solutions**

Equally, your statement: "I know the best solution to your problems" is another mistake. You, of course, can make suggestions but ideas should first come from people. You can become a facilitator in helping people select the best option(s) for solving their problems.

#### **iii) Participation in action**

Another common mistake you as a community worker must not make is stating: "Don't worry I

will do what is needed to solve your problem". Remember, people like to tackle their own problems. If you do all the solving while people remain as spectators, they will not have the satisfaction of handling a problem. They may also criticize and blame you for anything that goes wrong. As a skilled professional, you can probably do things better and faster. But when you involve the people, the sense of responsibility is shared, people appreciate the efforts you are putting in and feel committed towards the change that is introduced.

### **Facilitating Participation**

In order to facilitate participation by the people, you must keep the following three points in mind.

#### **i) Group Consensus**

Firstly, meetings and group discussions are very useful methods of encouraging participation. These may be formal in nature wherein matters are discussed with leaders or they may be informal in nature where in matters are discussed with leaders or they may be informal, friendly discussions with individuals or small groups. Whenever possible, you should try and get all people to come to a consensus about an issue. This helps to guarantee participation and



Listen to the Community - Offer to help

commitment.

### ii) Cultural Ethos

Secondly, it is very important to remember the cultural ethos. For Example, in some communities it is not acceptable that young people voice their opinions in the presence of elders in a public meeting or at a common ground where all segments of society can meet, discuss and plan action.

### iii) Encouraging local leadership

Thirdly, encourage leadership within the community. For problems that are common

in nature, you should lead the formation of a group representing all segments of the community. This would help in discussions on problematic issues from all angles, keeping everybody's interest in focus. This would help in developing solutions and action plans.

Remember, action does not happen by itself. You will often need to encourage people to take responsibility.

Once an action plan to solve a problem is put into practice and it starts progressing, your role as a group facilitator becomes very important. You have to help to analyse the success or failure of the action plan that was implemented. When you discuss the processes with the people, it helps them to learn. If the people themselves are able to assess why the action plan succeed or failed, they will be able to organize more effectively next time.

### Avoiding Prejudices and Bias

All people have prejudices. To be a successful communicator, you should first become aware of your own prejudices and attitudes. However, difficult it may seem, **you must not allow your own prejudices to influence your behaviour.**

Very often, you may like or appreciate the gestures of some person or persons in an area. Irrespective of your personal likes, you should involve all persons in the developmental work or

else some of the people will feel hurt or alienated. Bias will lesion your credibility and affect the trust and relationship you have build up with the community.

The above were some general points that you should keep in mind while you are working in communication.