

Inspiring Action

A guide for practitioners.

Insights from the Women Reaching Women project and potential learning/actions for organisations.

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Introduction

Women Reaching Women – a project to raise awareness about the disproportionate impact of global poverty and climate change on women – ran over three years, with annual training events. It was delivered by a partnership between the WI, Oxfam and The Everyone Foundation, who met every six weeks and developed working materials, educational events and ongoing support for the participating federations of the WI.

One of the roles of The Everyone Foundation was to evaluate the project, and we did this using an action research methodology. Throughout our work together we constantly reviewed our learning as a project team and refined our approach.

Through this process we have identified seven insights – characteristics of the project or the way we worked – that we think significantly affected the impact of the project and the experience of the participants.

In this document we set out these insights, in the hope that some of them will either chime with your experience or help you to enhance the impact of your own projects.

We don't claim that all the insights are groundbreaking – in fact, several of them are probably just common sense – but we do claim that they made a significant impact on our particular project. Neither do we claim that these insights will have universal value; rather we offer them to you in the hope that some of them might be useful when considering the ways that you develop projects in the future. The seven insights we have to share are:

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As well as descriptions of the insight – including how it was relevant to our project and the difference it made – we have also shared our current questions, ie the areas that each insight is now prompting us to explore some more. If you are drawn to these areas of exploration, then we would be interested in discussing future projects together.

You will also find that we have created an 'action' section for each insight – setting out the implications of this insight for our work, and some ways that organizations and individuals who are interested in this area might develop their skills and practice.

We hope you find this document useful, and welcome your responses and questions.

Additional resources are available at www.everyonefoundation.org.

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Front cover photo: The people of Northamptonshire celebrate International Women's Day, 8th March, and highlight that the MDGs are promises that should not be broken.

Insight 1 Connectedness

Summary:

What we mean by connectedness

We focused on how participants were similar to the women they were learning about, and explored the ways in which they were connected and the same.

Connectedness answers the question – why should I care?

How it is relevant

There is lots of information and data about why people need help or support, and this doesn't always seem to create action. We often dismiss information about people that we feel distant from.

While we might agree to the abstract fact that we are all part of a common humanity, really looking at this relationship and exploring its implications creates a more powerful experience when engaging with people from around the world.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- Considering their connection with people from around the world helped participants to be moved by the stories of women affected by climate change in developing countries.
- Seeing the women's likeness to themselves, and thinking of them as sisters with similar concerns or mothers with similar hopes and dreams, built a powerful sense of connection and increased participants' motivation to address the issues.
- People told their own stories about those close to them, which showed strong parallels to the life experiences of women in the developing world. Seeing these parallels clearly moved them and the people listening to them.
- This connection to other people made issues that had previously appeared insurmountable feel more human in scale. Addressing these issues therefore felt more achievable.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- What techniques are most effective for building a sense of connection?
- What tools can we give people that will enable them to make connections more effectively?
- Of the factors that prevent people connecting, which are the most powerful?

Connections:

How connectedness links with other insights

- The power of stories – stories can create connectedness.
- Authentic communication – it is easier to establish a sense of connection when we speak and listen authentically.
- Individual/particular – it is easier to establish a sense of connection when we consider the circumstances, values and experiences of a single person.
- Collective action – connection with the external issue might first be explored in the group.



Lucy hangs up washing in Nairobi, after her shift at a Wal-mart supplier, showing that we all do the same things, and are connected in a range of ways. Photo: Amie Vitale/Oxfam

Implications:**How this might affect our work**

- Start with a more fundamental conversation with your activists about their relationship with the people they are seeking to help.
- Focus on your connection to help resolve the natural human feelings of disconnection, futility and lack of responsibility that can be barriers to action for activists and supporters.

Knowledge

- Research and understand the ways in which your issues have parallels in the lives of your activists.
- Ask the people you are working with what parallels they see in these issues.
- Explore the issue yourself using a connections map.
- Build a picture of how we contribute to these issues in our daily lives.
- Map out how your various topics are interconnected.
- Notice what 'distancing behaviours' people you work with display. Explore what might be causing or allowing these.
- Notice what 'distancing behaviours' the public displays to your activists. Explore what might be causing or allowing these.

Skills

- Evaluate your ability to facilitate these deeper feelings with your participants.
- Explore the skills you have to challenge and uncover connections.
- Refine your skills in making links for people between themselves and the issues that they are exploring.
- Encourage people to develop their own reflective and communication skills.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore the way that you think about the work you do.
- Explore the connections you have with other people across the globe.
- Look at the ways in which you bring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to life in your work.
- Explore the importance that you place on building emotional connections to the work you are doing with participants.

Techniques you might use with a group*

- Connections map.
- Parallel stories.
- My hopes and ambitions.
- People like you.
- Four a day exercise.

*PDF tools are available at www.everyonefoundation.org.

Training and next steps

- 'Connectedness' workshop with The Everyone Foundation.
- 'Facilitation skills to create deeper connections' workshop with The Everyone Foundation.
- Speak with Richard or Dawn at The Everyone Foundation.

Insight 2 The power of stories

Summary:

What we mean by the power of stories

Human beings are storytelling animals. Stories are a powerful mechanism for engagement and communication. They engage our emotions, as well as making our knowledge more portable and easy to share.

The power of stories answers the question – what does this mean to me?

Context:

How it is relevant

During our daily lives, we send and receive a lot of information. When this information is shaped so that it has some of the fundamental characteristics of stories, it has greater impact and traction. Stories humanize situations, and help people to talk about what they have learned.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- People related most powerfully to the stories contained in the Oxfam film, 'Sisters on the Planet'. These stories awakened their emotions in a manner that the bare facts and figures in their workbook failed to.
- When participants shared stories collected during their project activity these always had more impact than descriptions of that activity.
- Some participants chose to retell stories they had heard from others, as part of their project activity.
- Stories are powerful tools that can help people to care. They enable people to imagine themselves in situations they have not experienced, and to feel these more powerfully. When people can visualize themselves, someone who could be them, or a loved one, in a story then it has additional power.
- Communicating emotion unlocks action (while communicating facts triggers analysis), and stories are powerful tools for communicating emotion.

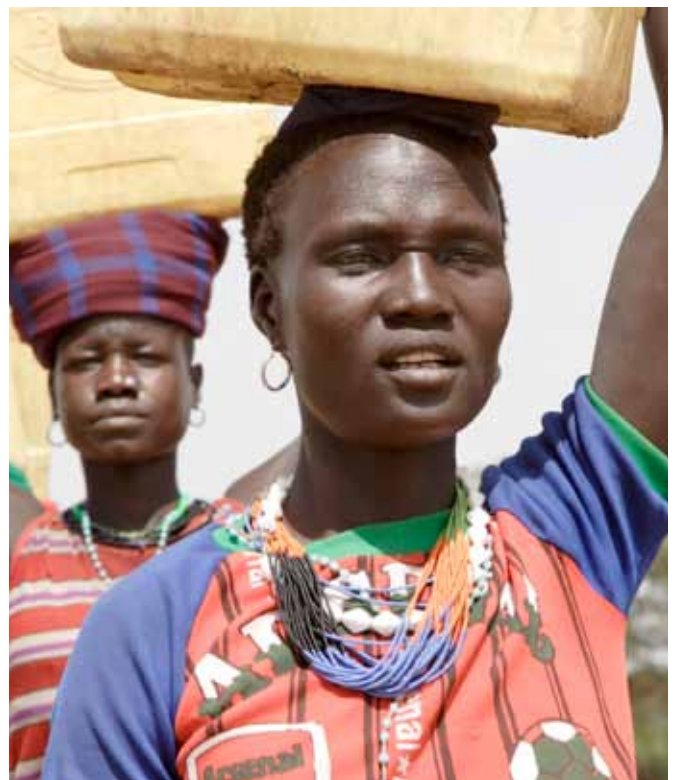
Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- What are some of the most powerful story types and formats?
- How do the stories we found powerful relate to archetypes like the hero(ine)'s journey?
- How can we incorporate existing research and insights about storytelling into our work?
- What is the impact of creating (rather than simply retelling) stories?

Connections: How the power of stories connects with other insights

- Connectedness – stories can create connectedness.
- Authentic communication – personal stories, authentically told, have real power.
- Individual/particular – stories about individual people, who could be the listener or someone they care about, have greater power.



The story of Martina from Caicaonan in Uganda touched us all in ways that facts alone could not. Photo: Geoff Sayer/Oxfam

Action

Implications:

How might this affect our work

- Consider how you present information in order to give it some of the inherent characteristics of stories.
- Encourage activists to explore the stories they want to tell as part of their action.
- Consciously set out to capture stories as part of your evaluation.

Knowledge

- Explore the many resources that support storytelling.
- Look at some of the story 'archetypes' and explore which of these suit your programme.
- Reflect on the stories that seem to resonate most powerfully with your participants and try to uncover their characteristics.
- Try to identify stories from activists' lives that parallel the experiences they are campaigning about.
- Develop an understanding of how to elicit stories from participants.
- Look for places in your current communications where there is an over-reliance on facts or data.

Skills

- Develop your storytelling skills.
- Develop your ability to create an atmosphere or environment where stories can be heard, will resonate, and are given respect.
- Empower others to tell their stories.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore the ways in which you relate to stories at the moment.
- Reflect on the balance of 'thinking, feeling and doing' in the work that you are responsible for.
- Identify ways in which the beliefs of the group inhibit the telling and appreciation of stories.

Techniques you might use with a group*

- Storytelling circle.
 - What it means to me exercise.
 - Starting with me exercise.
- * *PDF tools are available at www.everyonefoundation.org.*

Training and next steps

- Explore the myriad of storytelling resources available.
- Speak to Dawn or Richard at The Everyone Foundation.

Insight 3 Talking is doing

Summary:

What we mean by talking is doing

We discovered that our participants valued action above talking. We had to show them that awareness-raising really creates concrete impacts in the longer term. We called this 'talking is doing' – showing awareness-raising as part of a set of causal relationships that creates social change.

Talking is doing answers the question – what difference am I making?

Context:

How it is relevant

People wanted to feel that they were taking concrete actions. In order to feel the value of communicating and raising awareness, we found it useful to describe talking as a powerful, valuable and effective 'action'. We also found it useful to demonstrate the impact of awareness-raising on a continuum of social change – from shifting opinion, all the way through to legislative change.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- Our group was intuitively happier being asked to take actions such as raising money or writing a letter. Many exhibited some resistance to the request that they simply talked to people about the situation.
- After we described the 'talking as doing' model, several members appeared happier with it, and came to understand the impact that their conversations could have.
- By using evidence – both a theoretical model and a case study referring to a government announcement about aid – we increased confidence in talking as doing.
- We have found that the natural question 'what can I do to help?' needs a non-intuitive answer or, at least, a process of reflection to appreciate.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- How can we make raising awareness feel even more concrete?
- In what ways can we more effectively track the causal relationships to prove the positive impact of raising awareness?
- What other factors cause people to feel dissatisfied with pure awareness-raising, and what can we do about these?

Connections:

How talking is doing relates to other insights

- Collective action – talking is doing helps people to appreciate the collective impact they are making.
- The power of confidence – understanding the impact of awareness-raising can fuel confidence and a sense of self-worth.



Ganawathi is a change maker in Sri Lanka. Here she takes part in a performance depicting women breaking the silence and speaking out against violence
Photo: Annie Bungeroth/Oxfam

Implications:

How this might affect our work

- Explore the causal relationships that your activism is based on, and make this more explicit to people you are working with.
- Enable activists to create a mixed range of activity so they feel satisfied by the actions they are taking across the spectrum.

Knowledge

- Understand the causal relationships within your campaigning that mean that talking is doing.
- Explore participants' attitudes to raising awareness.
- Identify opportunities to allow a wide range of actions from the more simplistic to the fundamental.
- Develop case studies that demonstrate the social impact of awareness-raising activities.

Skills

- Develop your ability to map impact chains and communicate the causal relationships in powerful ways.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore your own attitude to awareness-raising actions.
- Expose participants to the causal impact chain that links their awareness-raising to real social change.

Techniques you might use with a group

- Present the causal impact chain.
- Share data that demonstrates the impact of awareness-raising.
- Have a 'what do you value' conversation to uncover participants' attitudes to awareness-raising and other actions.

Insight 4 Authentic communication

Summary:

What we mean by authentic communication

Communicating in a way that is honest, open and transparent can make a powerful impact. Listening deeply and speaking with truth and feeling can cut through the superficial communication of the day to day, and develop strong emotional connections.

Authentic communication answers the question – who else cares?

Context:

How it is relevant

We have many conversations on a superficial level. This means we do not fundamentally connect, and do not create rapport. These conversations might communicate facts and information, but do not communicate emotion to resonate and engage. It is important for people to find a way to communicate authentically – so that they explore and expose their true selves. This makes it possible for other people to connect with them on an emotional level.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- Participants who were 'present' in their conversation, and those who could listen deeply, created these powerful connections with others.
- Those who revealed their personal relationship with the topic, and shared this with others, appeared to have a more fundamental impact.
- Participants were moved when they witnessed others who spoke authentically about their personal experience and then related this to the topic we were exploring.
- When participants listened deeply, and without inhibition, they heard the other person more powerfully and made a more meaningful connection.
- People were more moved to act when they had listened deeply and spoken with authenticity.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- How do we consistently create the conditions in which people can communicate authentically?
- How do we enable people to communicate more authentically when they are working with us?
- What additional benefits does an ability to communicate authentically have on participants and our organisations?

Connections:

How authentic communication links with other insights

- Connectedness – communicating authentically enables the realization and expression of connections.
- The power of stories – personal stories, authentically told, have real power.
- Talking is doing – talking has greater power to create change when it is done in an authentic manner.
- Individual/particular – authentic listening and speaking are most powerful when related to individual experiences and feelings.
- The power of confidence – it takes confidence to really listen and expose your authentic self.
- Collective action – listening and talking with authenticity might first be experienced within a safe group environment.



Sybil Graham and Enid Brown in deep and heartfelt discussion as part of the Women Reaching Women project. Photo: Dawn Langley/Everyone Foundation

Action

Implications:

How this might affect our work

- Explore the skills that participants have developed.
- Explore and target the ‘quality’ as well as the ‘quantity’ of communication (which might have been a more dominant focus in the past).
- Consider the skills and beliefs of facilitators – to ensure that they can help create the conditions needed for truly authentic communication.

Knowledge

- Understand the characteristics of authentic communication so that you can reinforce it when you experience it.
- Understand how to create an environment where authentic communication is easy and natural.
- Review opportunities to introduce this topic with activists.
- Explore which elements of your project will benefit most from a focus on authentic communication.

Skills

- Notice the impact of your authentic communication on others and develop your awareness of this distinction.
- Develop your ability to speak authentically on topics that you care about.
- Develop your ability to listen deeply and create an environment in which others can speak authentically.
- Build your questioning skills to prompt and uncover authentic feeling in others.
- Develop the facilitation skills needed to create an environment where authentic communication is easier.
- Train your supporters in these skills.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore the beliefs and attitudes that prevent you from always communicating authentically.
- Try to notice the circumstances in which you find it easy to listen or speak authentically, and explore the beliefs and attitudes that underlie this.
- Work with participants to explore the attitudes and beliefs that might be behind a more guarded communication style.

Techniques you might use with a group

- Exploring personal stories.
- Exploring parallel lives.
- Listening to each others’ experiences.
- One-to-one coaching.

Training and next steps

- ‘Communicating authentically’ workshop with The Everyone Foundation
- ‘Listening skills’ workshop with The Everyone Foundation
- ‘Facilitation skills to create authentic communication’ workshop with The Everyone Foundation.

Insight 5 Individual or particular

Summary:

What we mean by individual or particular

We identified that it was easier for participants to engage with a campaign message when it was illustrated by an individual. Large groups of affected people cause us to feel that our personal efforts are likely to be futile.

Individual or particular answers the question – is it worth it?

Context: How it is relevant

Futility is a powerful reaction to large and significant challenges, and there is a lot of evidence that human beings react more positively towards a single, identifiable person than a host or multitude of affected people.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- Participants were moved by some of the women featured in Oxfam's film, 'Sisters on the Planet', and their concern and interest was maintained over time.
- They reported that this film had an engaging impact on the audiences they in turn worked with.
- People who could share direct experiences from their own lives moved audiences and engaged them in the wider topics.
- Participants described the experiences of individuals who epitomized the positive impact that one woman can have. They reported that this had a powerful impact on others.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- In what ways are messages of mass need currently inhibiting action?
- How do we ensure that individual stories aren't manipulative?
- Given that the biggest issues have mass impacts, how can we communicate both the mass and

the individual without creating reactions of disassociation and futility?

- What are the implications of this insight on generic issues such as gender?
- What are the implications of this insight for large-scale issues such as climate change?

Connections:

How individual or particular links with other insights

- The power of stories – stories about individual people, who could be the listener or someone they care about, have greater power.
- Connectedness – it is easier to establish a sense of connection when we consider the circumstances, values and experiences of a single person.
- Authentic communication – authentic listening and speaking is most powerful when related to individual experiences and feelings.



Kita Zedor from Bainet in Haiti after the hurricane of August 2007. Photo: Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam

Implications:

How this might affect our work

- Review how much you translate large-scale issues into an individual scale.
- Encourage your activists to look for personal experiences they can talk about as part of their action.
- Look for activists' experiences that they can share to illustrate the impact of individuals.

Knowledge

- Identify individual stories that epitomize the mass-impact situations you are working on.
- Develop specific individual stories that participants can use.
- Explore which individual stories have the greatest impact on your participants and the people they engage.

Skills

- Develop your questioning skills to uncover the impact on individuals of larger events and situations.
- Encourage activists to draw out the individual impacts when talking about issues.
- Encourage activists to talk about their own particular reactions and emotions, as well as the situation.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Compare how you feel when exploring a general situation compared to a particular story, and how it affects your motivation to act.
- Encourage your group to compare how they feel when exploring a general situation compared to a particular story, and how it affects their motivation to act.
- Reflect on your desire to describe the mass impact, and question the extent to which this leads to feelings of inertia and futility rather than motivation to act.

Techniques you might use with a group*

- Parallel stories.
- Starting with me.
- Complacency cards.

* *PDF tools are available at www.everyonefoundation.org.*

Training and next steps

- Speak with Dawn or Richard at The Everyone Foundation.

Insight 6 Collective action

Summary:

What we mean by collective action

The group benefited from working together to develop ideas and create action. The cumulative impact of their work, together with a sense of solidarity, seemed to bolster them and mitigate feelings of futility.

Collective action answers the question – what can we do?

Context:

How it is relevant

When working to address large or global issues, feelings of futility are common and can be powerful. Working together creates a useful counterpoint to this, and sets expectations at a more achievable level.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- The group felt a strong sense of shared achievement about the cumulative impact of their individual work. Across the project, many thousands of people were reached and hundreds of events and activities were arranged.
- By planning and celebrating together, a consensus was established about what a good level of activity might be. This contained setting expectations at an achievable level, and enabling people to feel good about their work despite not 'solving the issue'.
- The peer support that individuals experienced, during the training sessions and throughout the year, was positive and useful. Participants shared knowledge, techniques and contacts for the good of the project as a whole.
- There was a strong sense of community among the group. This bolstered them; helping them through difficult patches and creating a sense of celebration and mutual respect when they came together and shared their achievements.

- The mixed skills and approaches that people brought to their work broadened the range of initiatives that people took, and ensured that everyone's approach was respected and valued.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- How can groups be empowered to support each other even more?
- What group-forming approaches work best?
- How can groups be supported and enabled in the most cost-effective manner?

Connections:

How collective action links with other insights

- Connectedness – connection with the external issue might first be explored within the group.
- Authentic communication – listening and talking with authenticity might first be experienced within a safe group environment.
- The power of confidence – peer support, cumulative impact and sense of community can help develop individual confidence.



The group of federation representatives coming together to share learning, stories of progress and to offer each other support.

Photo: Dawn Langley/Everyone Foundation

Implications:

How this might affect our work

- Create groups, wherever possible, to produce informal support and a greater cumulative impact.
- Ensure that attention is given to the group dynamic, and that time is allocated to helping it to form.
- Encourage people to work together (but recognize the power of the individual to motivate themselves and others).

Knowledge

- Understand the ways in which collective action is currently benefiting your projects.
- Explore where collective action could have a bigger impact – ie where there is untapped potential.
- Develop an understanding of group dynamics.
- Review the extent to which projects create opportunities for powerful groups to form.
- Review the extent to which peer support is central to the projects that you run.
- Identify the ways in which group impact is accumulated and data about it shared across the group.

Skills

- Develop facilitation skills to enable groups to form and perform.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore the extent to which collective action is valued in your projects.

Techniques you might use with a group

- Shared planning sessions.
- Group communication tools on- and off-line.
- Shared learning sessions.
- Presentations of cumulative results.
- Develop peer support structures.

Insight 7 The power of confidence

Summary: What we mean by the power of confidence

We identified that an individual's personal confidence had an impact on their effectiveness as an activist, and that interventions can be made that will affect confidence levels.

The power of confidence fuels the statement – I can make a difference.

Context:

How it is relevant

We have noticed that a focus on knowledge (what you need to know and tell others) and significance (why this cause matters and is urgent) are more prevalent than a focus on confidence (why I am the right person to make a difference). People who lack self-belief can be inhibited from taking action (and may cite a lack of knowledge as the reason). Those who have strong self-belief might take action despite being aware that they could know more.

Impact:

The difference this characteristic can make

- We identified that the people with the greatest level of personal confidence (sometimes based on former careers) were most ready to take action.
- We recognized that, alongside being informed and feeling a sense of urgency to act, feeling able to do what was required was a critical factor.
- There are interventions (such as practice, personal storytelling, preparation, peer support, visualization and one-to-one coaching) that enable people to access or develop their confidence in this area.
- Personal confidence also has an impact on people's ability to expose their authentic selves to the work that they are doing.
- People who have the initial confidence to act often gain confidence from acting – in a virtuous circle.

Explore:

Questions we now want to explore further

- Can we develop measures that we could roll out to quantify the impact of confidence on levels of activism?
- How powerful is the virtuous circle in this area – and how important, therefore, are initial 'kick start' interventions?
- What interventions have the greatest confidence-building impact?
- What percentage of potential activists are inhibited or disabled by a lack of confidence?
- To what extent do we use 'insufficient knowledge' as a smokescreen for insufficient confidence?

Connections:

How the power of confidence links with other insights

- Authentic communication – it takes confidence to really listen, and to expose your authentic self.
- Talking is doing – understanding the impact of awareness-raising can fuel confidence and a sense of self-worth.
- Collective action – peer support, cumulative impact and sense of community can help develop individual confidence.



Sahena from Kunderpara in Bangladesh has been elected president of the local women's committee, in the face of stiff opposition from the men in her family. Her whole story demonstrates the power of confidence. Photo: Amin/Oxfam

Action

Implications:

How this might affect our work

- Consider focusing more on activists' confidence.
- Investigate the benefit of coaching and peer-support conversations in addition to the existing focus on knowledge.
- Explore and track personal confidence, and correlate this with numbers of actions to validate this finding.
- Consider additional training interventions for those who do not feel confident, supplementing training orientated towards sharing information and building a sense of urgency.

Knowledge

- Understand how to gauge confidence in yourself and your participants.
- Identify the ways in which your programmes currently develop confidence in participants.
- Identify the most effective confidence-building measures with your participant groups.
- Explore the impact of confidence on performance in your projects.
- Explore the level of knowledge that people actually need in order to operate effectively, and develop ways to demonstrate that this level is sufficient.

Skills

- Develop your ability to identify when confidence might be an issue for a participant.
- Develop your confidence-building skills.
- Develop your skills in facilitating others to build each others' confidence.

Attitudes/beliefs

- Explore the extent to which confidence is appreciated and nurtured in your programmes.
- Consider the extent to which your ways of working inhibit or reduce the confidence of participants.

Techniques you might use with a group

- Peer support structures.
- One-to-one coaching.
- Future pacing exercises.
- Practice and role play.
- 'Kick start' initiatives.
- Regular reviews of performance and impact.

Training and next steps

- Coaching skills.
- Facilitation skills.





Oxfam

the everyone foundation

The Everyone Foundation is a charity committed to bringing people together to improve the world for everyone. We do this by exploring, promoting and celebrating our common humanity. In this project we used an action research methodology to learn with our participants and develop these insights. This toolkit is part of our commitment to disseminate our learning across the sector.

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