

Let your Heart Beat in their Community



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Introduction

It is becoming more and more of a social-political rule to include people from different backgrounds in our work. The majority (the largest group of people with the same ethnic-cultural background in a given setting) is continuously looking for ways to make their work accessible to other groups, including different minorities.

Many organisations that practise a policy of diversity ask themselves a basic question: How can we recruit people from another background than ours and include them in our programme? How can we motivate them in a way that ensures continuity over a long-term period?

In this article I will describe the way I do this in my work.

A personal example

In August 1998 a 'motivation' - project was started in the municipality of Capelle aan den IJssel in Holland. The aim of this project was to motivate unemployed people to find a job or at least to follow a course which would make it easier for them to find a job in the near future.

The target group

The project targeted young people of Dutch-Caribbean background from the Dutch Antilles (five islands which are a dependency of the Kingdom of the Netherlands). The project focuses on two specific groups: young people between 18 and 30 and single mothers.

The working context

There is a relatively high concentration of Dutch-Caribbean people in the neighbourhood of Middelwatering which is situated in the municipality of Capelle aan den IJssel. The

majority are unemployed and do not have much prospect of getting a job. They either do not have the necessary requirements or do not know how to proceed to be eligible for a job on the labour market.

At present, our target group receive their income from the local social services (minimum income). Over the years, they have developed a lifestyle that often implies not having the discipline, routine, attitude and commitment towards work which is necessary for everybody who wants to be active in the labour market.

Like many other unemployed people, a lot of the people in our target group tend to go to bed very late and get up late the next morning. Besides, their contact with the rest of the community is at a minimum level. They have little confidence in the local government and among them there exists a feeling of alienation from 'the system', that is from most governmental institutions and organisations.

For its part, the local government has realised that it has not succeeded in its action as an intermediary for jobs for the Dutch-Caribbeans through its regular offer.

The regular offer consists in an individual coaching programme for all unemployed people. This programme is set up in four phases which are related to the distance that exists between the unemployed person and the labour market. 'Distance' in this context means the amount of effort the unemployed person has to make to find a job. From this perspective, people who have been unemployed for less than a year are in phase 1 because they have a better chance of finding a job. The distance is not so great because not long ago they were operating in a setting where discipline and

by Nynoshca Fecunda



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commitment were required. In phase 4 you find people who have been unemployed for over three years. They have a longer distance to the labour market. They will be coached more intensively, because in most cases they need to become motivated again, to believe in themselves and to recognise the importance of working or going to school.

But this approach limited to individual coaching is not successful for everybody; in particular it did not work for most of the people from a Caribbean background. To improve the social situation of the Dutch-Caribbeans living in Capelle aan den IJssel, the local government therefore decided to delegate responsibility to an external bureau, 'Dividiv CONSULT', which has experience in this kind of work.

The approach

Our target group needs an approach that most fits their lifestyle. Dividiv CONSULT was already aware that the target group would not react to the traditional initiatives. An example of the latter is sending out letters to invite people to follow an individual coaching programme. Generally, Dutch-Caribbean people will not react to these letters; they just do not appeal to them. Sometimes they do not even open the envelopes.

An alternative approach has therefore been developed. Instead of doing all the work from the office and sending letters to people, interviewing them about their wishes and possibilities, making an individual plan for each of them, etc., a more dynamic and interactive approach has been found. This new approach looks at the relations existing within the community.

Before saying more about the approach, it is important to talk about the communities we are working with: the white Dutch community and the black Dutch community.

The white Dutch community, the majority in this case, is generally speaking, individualistic-oriented. There is a Dutch saying that goes: 'Take care of yourself and God will take care of the rest'. This saying illustrates the idea that everybody is personally responsible for what he or she makes of his or her life. This point of view suggests that the concrete result is more important than the process by which you get the result (including social relationships). This is why white Dutch people are seen as task-

oriented people. They will tend to make efforts to accomplish a task most of the time, regardless of the price they may have to pay for it.

The black Dutch community (of Caribbean background) on the other hand is more collectivist-oriented. People prefer to do things in groups, are more motivated to do things when they are working together. This often means that the process and the relationship with each other are more important than the task or the result to be achieved.

For example, the black community would like to have a space where they can organise leisure time activities for their youngsters after school. A small building is put at the disposal of young people between 12 and 16 years to organise activities. The community received permission to make use of the building for two hours per week. One of their activities is a dance group for children who should have the chance to practice for dance performances. In spite of the age restriction set by the municipality, the black community includes children under 12 years or teenagers over 16 years into their activity. If they did not include them, it would be experienced by the rest of the black community as not fair towards the children who want to take part but cannot do it because of their ages. On the other hand, the management of the foundation which belongs to the white Dutch community applies the age rule that has been agreed upon with the local government. Even though the management of the foundation has complete understanding for the situation, in their opinion they have no possibilities to change it. Currently, some negotiations are taking place between both parties and a mediator. If they fail to come to an agreement, the activity will be stopped.

In this situation it is very important as a professional to acquire a position of understanding and trust from all the parties involved. It is the task of the professional to invest in both parties in order from the beginning, to build up a relationship based on trust. To do so, we started to go personally to the neighbourhoods, to visit people at home, to go to activities organised for and by people themselves and to help them solve the problems they had with the community or with particular persons. Like this a stable foundation of trust was built up.

We soon found out who were the key persons in the community. Especially with these key persons we built up a solid relationship based

on trust. This means that we asked them for feedback on our plans; we discussed problems of the community with them, and we helped them to find solutions. The key persons receive a lot of respect from the community. It was therefore important to involve them in our plans and to make sure that they supported our ideas. Like this, we had a bigger chance that the rest of the community would do so as well.

The results

A very important part of our work is group activity. Most of the people we want to work with belong to phase 4. The distance of our target group from the labour market is big. So the idea is to create activities that motivate people to become active again and eventually to become interested in going back to school or finding a job.

We tried to achieve these results by providing empowerment training. And we wanted to recruit both men and women participants in this training.

We had different ways of recruiting our participants. Partly we contacted people during our visits to their activities in the neighbourhood. We also found participants through personal problem-solving contacts. For instance we helped them to deal with problems of huge debts, or lack of knowledge about which governmental institution could provide certain services, such as the right school for their children. During such contacts, we advised people or brought them in contact with relevant institutions.

Besides these ways of recruiting people for the project, we also used the experience of the key persons to find participants. We thus organised a meeting with the key persons to explain to them what we wanted to do and for what reasons. We encouraged them to give us feedback and made them enthusiastic about our plans. Finally, we agreed that they would go back to their community and look for participants, according to their motivation and best will, whom they think will fit best into the empowerment training that we provided.

Only women have applied for the empowerment training. We were curious about why men did not apply. We found out that in the Dutch-Caribbean community men participate in neighbourhood activities but do not feel attracted by activities like training

courses. For them 'training' is something for women. They support the women's participation but do not consider training as something that they can participate in.

At this stage we are developing an alternative approach for men. It seems that they are very involved in sports activities. They have their own volleyball, football and domino clubs etc. We are going to use these gatherings to approach the men. Our aim is to find out how we can use what they are interested in and how we can develop a programme that better meets their needs.

Conclusions

In order to reach people of a different ethnic-cultural background it is important to know what these people perceive as important in their lives. You have to take the people and their activities seriously, start at the point where the people are right now, listen carefully to what they want and try to include this as much as possible in your programme. Involve the people for whom the project is meant in the project. It is important that participants can identify themselves with the project.

On this basis, you can build a relationship based on trust with the community. The feeling of being taken seriously and of being respected plays an important role. Give the people what they want in a way that is acceptable to all parties. In most cases, if people get what they think is important for them they will gradually become open to new ideas.

To find out what they need, ask the people themselves. Often people know what they need, but sometimes they just do not know how to get it or do not yet have the ability to get it by themselves. Therefore it is always important to be personally motivated to do this kind of work, because this motivation enables us not only to think, analyse and structure the situation but, above all, to empathise with the people we are working with. Make a connection with their heart. Let the people feel that your heart beats in their community as well.

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