

Campaigners do it together! How we can make change

Participant Summary by David Kirkman

We started with a new way of introducing ourselves, a ball was thrown from person to person with the thrower stating his or her name and that of the person they chose to throw it to. This went well with one ball, but with three balls it was not so easy.

We then each briefly described an issue we were concerned about on a folded piece of paper and placed it on a “washing line” which had been stretched across one side of the room. Following on from this we were asked to imagine a future newspaper headline about our chosen issue and then write it on a sheet of paper on the wall. The issues chosen included climate change, the arms trade, the treatment of asylum seekers and mental health amongst many others. The headlines were all very optimistic.

In the next exercise we split into small groups based on shared interests and tried to describe the issue using the pillars of power pyramid model. This is not so easy to describe in words but basically you draw an upturned triangle which represents the issue or problem, climate change for example, and then draw several pillars holding up the triangle. Each pillar represents a group, institution or ideology that are a cause of the problem or act as an obstacle to change. ‘Pillars’ for the climate change example included oil companies, consumerism and an economic system based on growth. The next step was to think of how each of the pillars could be removed. This proved to be a good way of breaking down what might otherwise seem to be an impossibly complex network into more manageable targets.

We then played the penguin game – one person was ‘it’ and waddled around like a penguin with everyone else trying to prevent the penguin from sitting on an empty chair. The most effective anti-penguin tactic proved to be kettling, as practiced by the Metropolitan Police. I am not sure what conclusions to draw from this.

After enjoying lunch on the balcony, we were introduced to the ‘social change turtle’. This was a picture of a turtle with the various roles and elements of a successful campaign for social change each occupying a scale of the turtle’s shell. The elements were awakening, effectiveness/evaluation, outreach, plod on, networking, vision (planning), training, self education, action and nourishment. The turtle represented the slow but resolute progress of the campaign.

We then watched an inspiring film about a campaign by Harvard students for a living wage for the college cleaners and caretakers. The three year campaign culminated in a sit-in of the college presidents office. The president initially refused to negotiate, saying that he would rather resign, but he eventually caved in and agreed to the student’s demands. After the film we

tried to identify the roles from the turtle's back in the campaign depicted in the film. This was followed by the 'paper clip discussion game' in which each person was given one or more paper clips. We then spoke about the film but the rule was that before speaking we had to throw a paperclip into the centre of the circle.

For the next exercise we returned to the issues we had chosen earlier and listed the various groups with an interest in the issue. We then each drew a 'social speedometer' and put the various groups on the dial, which instead of being a measure of speeds was a measure of sympathy, ranging from very unsympathetic through neutral to very sympathetic. From an activist point of view, this is a useful tool to help identify which groups to focus a campaign on.

Rosie then read an extract from Bridging the Class Divide by Linda Stout about an ideal society. After these inspiring words we were asked to think about what we were going to do next with regard to our own issue. Another round of the paper clip game allowed people to tell the group about their next step.

We then did an evaluation of the day by drawing a five point star, with points for new, clearer, questions, certain and anything else. We then put relevant comments next to each point on the star. We finished with non-verbal goodbyes. The day seemed to pass very quickly – always a good sign!