

Class 3 - How to carry out the listening process

(video transcription)

As we've seen so far, the first step to beginning a process of innovation and community transformation is to start up a listening process.

Remember, to do so we must have the following elements: a series of questions, the people we want to ask, tools for dialogue and spaces to encourage the collective interpretation of this information.

Let's look carefully at each of these elements in turn and how they're interrelated.

We need to define the questions that will underpin our work. Our goal is to generate information that describes the context we'll be working in and to identify the narratives that reveal the different perceptions, beliefs and values on which people's actions are based.

At Work4Progress, these questions are related to creating employment in Peru, India and Mozambique. For example, which obstacles in the labour market do young women face?

However, the kind of questions that help to reveal narratives are more along the lines of: What is the history of this community? Where are we headed? What would you like to do to change the situation? Who gains and who loses if things change?

Such questions are defined by bearing in mind the people who'll be involved in our listening group.

At Work4Progress we must select people with a variety of backgrounds:

- (1) The most disadvantaged, those excluded from formal networks and the people that suffer the problem we want to tackle;*
- (2) Public and private organisations working in the same field of action, in this case: creating employment and promoting entrepreneurship;*
- (3) People with influence, in social, economic and political terms.*

On drawing up this list, and already thinking about specific people, we also establish criteria related to gender and age: at least 60% of the people must be women and 50% young people.

Once we've defined the questions and identified the profiles (and even specific people), we can choose the communication channels, the format and the tools for gathering data.

The possibilities are endless, so our choice will depend on each particular situation. Some typical resources are: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, working groups, focus groups, participative and ethnographic research, forum theatre, storytelling, video, photography - and I'm sure you can think of some more.

And, of course, we also search for any statistical information available and compare our findings with any other data we can obtain, both qualitative and quantitative.

Just as important as establishing communication channels and community listening is having places where people can share and collectively interpret the information acquired.

We call these spaces for the collective interpretation of information and they take the form of places where people can get together, events, meetings and workshops, to which we invite a group of people and organisations to join us in going over the information we've managed to gather. These people and institutions make up our contrast group.

At Work4Progress, the contrast group is made up of public authorities responsible for creating employment schemes, private firms that hire personnel, schools and even universities which often face the challenge of employability.

These four elements must be used to improve the listening process, and so begins a repetitive process which gradually advances. First the narratives are identified in sufficient depth and detail to be able to share them with institutions related to the process, thereby producing collective interpretations that help us when we return to the community to corroborate our findings.

Let's look at this process in more detail and with some examples.

In particularly depressed areas, school teachers and even the families themselves tend to tell children that they need to study so they can leave the area and succeed. If success is identified with leaving the community, those who can leave will, while those who stay will feel they've failed.

In such communities, our initiatives to encourage local employment will never be seen as something successful. Remember that such narratives too often hinder the success of good occupation and employment programmes.

If we can gain greater insight into more subjective perceptions and narratives, we'll be better positioned to interpret certain behaviours and more likely to choose the right proposals to implement.

Once we have the information from the listening group, we invite the contrast group to give their opinions about the questions that underpin the whole process: What is the history each community tells of itself? How does it perceive its future? What are the main challenges and opportunities to create employment? What would they like to do to change the situation? And, once again, who gains and who loses if things change?

After finding out how each organisation interprets these questions, we hold a discussion to discover whether there's any agreement or discrepancy regarding the analysis or whether more information is needed.

This discussion helps us to identify more accurately different attitudes towards the most important issues, and we can also identify those issues where there's no agreement and whether some issues need to be explored in greater depth. And also whether we're lacking a point of view that we hadn't taken into account.

This part of the process is normally repeated 3 or 4 times a year, so our interpretation of what's happening gradually evolves.

The next step is to go back to the community to corroborate this analysis and shared narrative. The idea is to return to our listening group and say to them: "You said this about the difficulties to create new jobs, and we've checked this with a wide range of people, many of whom think the same. What do you think? Do you agree? What are we missing? Who else should we talk to?"

This process is repeated several times until the contrast group starts to identify possible actions and its members feel there's broad enough information to act.

By working in this way, we shift from individual narratives to shared narratives. We move a little closer to our goal: we've laid the foundations for genuine community transformation.

If you find all this interesting and useful, then we'll see each other again in the next class.