



Looking for leadership in unexpected places: Good Cents course.

Initiative: Good Cents Porirua.

Theme: Leading in and Leaderful

The Good Cents course is about more than budgeting. It has been developed by two staff from Wesley Community Actions Cannons Creek office in Porirua and is specifically tailored to low income and benefit recipients who are experiencing financial difficulty and crippling cycles of debt. The aim is to empower participants to take control of their financial situations through supporting and equipping them socially, emotionally and in their financial literacy to generate change.

The Good Cents course is embedded in a philosophy that encourages people to look at their own contribution to their financial situation and works to enable course participants to identify the positive actions they can take to reduce or eliminate their dependency on debt and grow their investment in their future. Before this can happen it was realised by Makerita and Matt – the facilitators of the course - that the first step is dealing with the overwhelming isolation and shame that go hand in hand with the experience of financial distress.

A key tool for beginning to break down these barriers is the sharing of personal experience and stories between participants – through which the realisation comes that they are actually not as alone in their experiences as they had thought. Knowing that others are struggling helps create the course and fellow participants as a safe space for sharing their difficulties. This has proven to have a powerful effect on people. Once these guards are down, course participants are free to begin creating the change that they've been held back from in the past, by their own inhibitions.

So a key challenge for facilitators is to find ways to encourage people to be willing to step out from that 'island' of isolation and shame. One way to achieve this that has proven very successful is for

Makerita and Matt as facilitators to learn to look for leaders in each group to help with leading the way – off that island as it were. Experience has shown repeatedly that these leaders are often not those that might have first been expected to take such a role. This acknowledgement in itself has encouraged a much more ‘wide open’ view from the facilitators in looking for leadership in unsuspecting places and people.

Often the first signals of growing leadership in someone are very tentative – little bids on the part of one or two participants which indicate a willingness to be vulnerable, to put themselves ‘out there’, taking the risk that they’ll look stupid. Frequently the courage is drawn from a desire to do what’s best for the others in the group, to support and encourage them (rather than for any direct benefit for themselves). This is a key quality of the leadership that is needed in this situation - the willingness to act for the group’s benefit, and prioritising this over any drive of self preservation. By recognising and strongly encouraging people who make these first steps, they grow and the group culture begins to develop.

As Peter Block (2008: 63) writes, “Choosing to be accountable for the whole, creating a context of hospitality and collective possibility, acting to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the centre – these are some of the ways we begin to create a community of citizens”. Block links citizenship to power, and describes how a true citizen reclaims their power such that “the audience creates the performance”. This is what happens in a Good Cents course. Nudging the leadership of participants to the fore confronts their freedom to choose a new way of living where they have more financial control and wellbeing. It also means that, in effect, they create the culture of their course. Who is there matters, and that it is them that is there matters.

As Block also says, accountability and commitment are forever paired, and come in many different guises. A quiet person who is reliable and contributes with no expectation of a personal return on their investment in the group can be a powerful leader for both the group and for themselves. One example of such a leader was Catherine (not her real name). Catherine is a very quiet and unassuming person much of the time and in the group setting didn’t at first stand out. But as the sessions of the course progressed Catherine began to quietly contribute. Her contributions had a significant effect, not only on herself in terms of breaking down some of the isolation she felt, but also on others who were able to take courage for her lead. Interestingly Catherine didn’t become especially confident in sharing or participating in the group – and she probably would never have perceived herself a leader. She continued contributing in a quite and unassuming way and backed her contributions up by being reliable in making every session of the course.

It was a difficult journey for Catherine, because as the isolation and related denial reduced, she began to feel worse as she was faced with the reality of her financial situation. With knowledge came depression. But this didn’t stop her or cause her to retreat to the false safety of the island again. She continued to grow herself and guide the group in her own ways.

A turning point for Catherine happened when one day she ended up volunteering for the day in Wesley Community Actions Porirua food bank. It was an impromptu decision on Catherine’s part, with no expectation of personal reward. It just happened that on the day she was at the Wesley office the food bank was short on volunteers and so she got dropped right in!

Catherine reported that the experience had made such a difference to her sense of well-being and motivation because she felt she'd been able to do something truly good and worthwhile. The opportunity to give back and to do something that was 'outside' of herself gave her the strength to continue with creating change in her life. From this point Catherine continued to create change in her own situation with a new sense of ownership and self-worth. She has now taken on a formal role as a volunteer at the food bank and has found that this commitment continues to help her feel more motivated in her own life. Catherine loves the feeling of being useful and like she's making a difference in the lives of others too.

Intent:

A key part of the Good Cents course is about nurturing leadership. This happens through the ways the facilitators look for leaders, how participants own their role in their own situations and futures and how both of these contribute to the culture and dynamic of the group.

Key learnings:

- Looking for leadership in less likely places and people means learning to see what is relevant and resonating within the group, rather than applying some externally developed model or format.
- Leadership from within a group is more powerful than that from outside when it comes to significant personal change. Significant change needs to be grounded in genuine experiences that are shared by people in similar situations in order for those people to step out of their comfort zone and into a new way of living.
- Knowledge is not necessarily power, and can in fact be incredibly disheartening. This means that significant change is a journey that has as many downs as ups and requires significant courage and commitment. Walking alongside others with the same struggle can grow not only personal motivation, it also grows empathy and support.
- Feeling useful and valued is a critical aspect of self-worth, and it requires significant self-worth to be bothered to change. Volunteering is an accessible and achievable way of nurturing self-worth while giving back to a community and feeling useful and valued.

Key outcomes:

- The course creates a space safe enough to share aspects of individual lives that have often been kept hidden from even the closest of people.
- Leadership from unlikely places and people has proven to be the most effective way of growing a group culture that is conducive to change. Knowing someone like you is stepping up and making significant change is a huge motivator to do the same.
- Individuals step up and make a difference in their own personal lives and the lives of those around them. Sometimes this drive for change also extends to contributing to the wider community. In fact all of these things are interwoven. Course facilitators have learnt that leadership comes in many guises. They continue to learn just how many and to effectively enable it to shine.

Key Contact person:

Matt Crawshaw
Good Cents Coordinator
Wesley Community Action

Email: goodcents@wesleyca.org.nz

Ph: 04 237 7923

Reference:

Story written by Matt Crawshaw and Denise Bijoux.

June 2012