

Frontline Staff as Social Innovators

Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein 01 February 2010

Frontline staff people are largely untapped resources as potential social innovators. This article describes how one staff person strengthened the ability of low-income clients to become more self-sufficient by adapting a cost-effective and capacity-building educational strategy to her daily work environment. The same educational strategy can lead to "microdemocracy" in which individuals use essential democratic skills in ordinary encounters with public agencies. The article concludes by presenting several criteria that must be met in order to make it possible for frontline staff to become social innovators.

Dominique had recently moved to Philadelphia when her landlord insisted that she immediately sign a document he presented to her. She hesitated, thought about what she was being asked to do, and refused to sign.

Her hesitation saved her, because the document would have effectively forced her to vacate her apartment in 30 days so that it could be rented to another tenant. Had she signed, Dominique might have found herself in a homeless shelter. She could have been one of many standing in line for a Section 8 certificate, or appealing to an

overwhelmed Legal Aid lawyer for help to get back into her apartment. She did not have to disrupt her life or access additional social services to put her life back in order.

What is most inspiring about this story, though, is that Dominique's refusal to be coerced resulted from skills that she had just learned in her GED and job training class. In effect, in addition to teaching reading and math skills, Dominique's instructor taught her how to ask her own questions and pay attention to decisions affecting her — how to be her own advocate.

In teaching Dominique these self-advocacy skills, the GED instructor, Ms. Earldine Tolbert, demonstrated how frontline staff in social and human service agencies can become drivers of innovation in daily practice. She took initiative to adapt an educational strategy to her workplace and began to work in a different way — and, in the process, demonstrated the great potential for frontline staff to build the capacity of clients and consumers to become more self-sufficient. The important individual, programmatic, and social outcomes resulting from this increase in self-sufficiency and self-advocacy can all be accomplished without additional funding, personnel, or resources that would be required if creating a separate discrete program.

A Social Innovator on the Job

Earldine Tolbert, a lifelong resident of Philadelphia, is an adult literacy instructor and Workforce Development (WELL) Program Specialist at Temple University's Center for Social Policy and Community Development. She realized, early on, that teaching her adult learners (as young as 16 and going on well into their 40s and 50s) "is more than just getting a paycheck' you have to have a passion for doing it."

Year after year, she was struck by the high numbers of low-literacy adults coming to the program because they lack a high school diploma. They show up and take a seat in her small, crowded classroom, squeezed tightly around narrow tables. Students are at many levels of readiness for the job market or for the GED they hope to get in lieu of the high school diploma they do not have.

Ms. Tolbert's primary job is to make sure the participants in her program learn to read, write, and compute well enough to get their GED, as the very first step out of a cycle of poverty and constant crises. But she is also a highly valued resource for the adult learners. She is consulted on everything from how to deal with the sudden disappearance of a child care provider, to the inability to access transportation, to health care crises, to dealing with recurring housing dilemmas posed by foreclosures, a limited supply of Section 8 certificates, and a change of landlords.

Clearly, the lack of a GED is not the only challenge faced

by the people in her program. Ms. Tolbert is a valuable resource, but they have been accustomed to leaning on her for help. She wants to help them stand on their own. She would have to shift from being their guide, advisor, problem solver, and advocate to helping them build their own capacity to solve their own problems.

But how can she make that happen?

Educational Strategy as Social Innovation

The adult learners in Ms. Tolbert's class are not dissimilar to other participants in job training and adult literacy programs all across the city, the state, and the country. In classroom after classroom, program after program, the official curriculum focuses on letters, words, facts, and numbers. *The unofficial curriculum — dealing with life's problems — requires ideas, resourcefulness, confidence, and the ability to think and act on one's own behalf.*

And this means that, in order to be most effective in helping those in their programs, Ms. Tolbert and others on the frontlines have to teach to the official and unofficial curriculum at the same time. But how?

The answer came as a result of a Fall 2008 training opportunity involving The Right Question Project (RQP). Organized by the Pennsylvania Department of Adult Education and funded primarily by the Rockefeller

Brothers Fund and the Carnegie Corporation, this training taught Ms. Tolbert and her colleagues how to adapt The Right Question Project to their work — and, in the process, challenged and stimulated them to think about making a small but quite significant shift in their work as frontline staff.

The two core skills taught in The Right Question Project (RQP) Strategy are deceptively simple.

- The ability to focus effectively on key decisions
- The ability to formulate questions, including questions about the reasons for a decision, the process for making it, and the role people affected by the decision can play in that process

These familiar skills are essentially self-advocacy skills, and are often acquired through years of higher education or professional training and experience. The innovation in the RQP is the **deliberate teaching of the skills to people who rarely have access to opportunities to learn them and who could most benefit from learning them.**

The RQP Strategy had originally emerged, as many innovations do, out of a series of mistakes. First, RQP staff were working on a drop-out prevention program and heard parents say they were not participating in their children's education because they "didn't even know what to ask." The statement was ignored for a while, until it

became clear that it was indeed a major, if previously overlooked, obstacle. The immediate response was to give a list of questions, but this only created more dependency. The next task — that went on for at least the next 15 years — focused on figuring out how to teach a very sophisticated, higher-order thinking skill to people with limited literacy and education.

Early mistakes eventually led to highly innovative and quite original methods that have come together into the RQP Strategy. It is now consistently recognized in communities around the country by frontline staff as the simplest, most powerful strategy available for helping people learn to advocate for themselves.

The observations and testimonies from the field are confirmed by a striking range of evaluations and studies across many fields. The data consistently shows that teaching RQP's skills leads to positive results, including:

- increased parent involvement in education in Kentucky,
- more effective self-advocacy among welfare clients in New Hampshire,
- increased voting rates among Arizona adult literacy students, and
- greater parent advocacy skills among low-income parents with children in early childhood programs in Massachusetts.

RQP's methods have also been effectively used in Canada and South Africa, and have been taught to NGO staff in Eastern Europe and Russia.

Adapting the RQP Strategy on the Frontlines in Philadelphia

Ms. Tolbert quickly saw that the RQP Strategy offered a simple and easy-to-replicate methodology for teaching people "how to identify what they need to know and how to formulate a good question that gets them the answers they need." Describing herself as "a person who asks questions," she realized that she never before had "a formal process for getting people into that asking-the-right-question mode. "

She quickly and easily adapted the RQP Strategy and made it an essential part of her program's Learning 2 Learn component. During Learning 2 Learn sessions, instructors and students together assess obstacles and challenges that may arise in the course of the class. As a result of RQP, Ms. Tolbert has a consistent methodology to turn her adult learners into problem solvers. It has changed the way she works with them — and it changes them and the way they interact with the world.

What happens when people who are accustomed to having decisions made for them begin to think and act on their own behalf? What happens when they begin to make connections between decisions made further up the

decision-making chain and their lives? They begin to see themselves as agents, able to act on their own behalf.

So when Dominique found herself confronted by a landlord who demanded that she immediately sign a lease, she turned to her RQP training. She asked key questions — about why she had to sign the document so quickly, about the content of the document, about implications of signing. By taking action in this way, Dominique prevented a sudden rush on emergency services. She asserted herself, felt confident enough to ask questions, and knew she could evaluate whether the answers were satisfactory, and this became a transformative moment in her life. She will not go back to “not knowing what to ask.”

Criteria for Promoting Frontline Staff People as Social Innovators

What can governmental departments, nonprofit agencies, and private foundations do to help develop the potential of frontline staff as social innovators? Promoting frontline social innovation requires that these four criteria be met:

1. **Commit to a vision of client self-sufficiency:** The overarching department or agency must have a vision of building the capacity of clients to become more self-sufficient and to begin to see themselves as citizens capable of helping themselves.
2. **Invest in frontline staff as social**

innovators: Frontline staff must be recognized for their critical importance in realizing the vision, and the organization must commit to investing in their role as social innovators.

3. **Use a simple strategy, technology, or methodology:** Frontline staff need simple tools and methods that can be easily integrated into their daily work and will help accomplish the goal of client self-sufficiency.
4. **Implement consistently:** Frontline staff need the opportunity and support to consistently implement the strategy designed to promote self-sufficiency.

These are straightforward enough criteria, but they are rarely met. A vision without a concomitant commitment to invest in staff development is rhetoric alone. And a vision and staff development with too complicated a strategy almost ensures a failure to implement, the binder-on-the-shelf syndrome. And even the perfect, simple, and easy-to-implement strategy is rendered useless if there is no organizational commitment to consistent use and implementation.

When the four criteria are met, Ms. Tolbert becomes a model social innovator. Dominique grows more confident and self-sufficient. She takes better advantage of services that move her along to independence, her GED, and job training program, and she does not need to access costly services that must address emergency needs. This can all be done, not by creating a new

program, but by promoting innovation within existing services.

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