



ENABLING QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN PRACTICE

Tower Hamlets Our Latest Newsletter (08/04/2019)



EQUIPed with agency: a page ripped from my personal diary

Today's comms are in a slightly whimsical frame, still inspired by the change and joy the team and I witnessed at the forum we recently attended in Scotland. The following might read more like a diary, but tries to capture the heart of what I felt in the company of so many learned and enthusiastic healthcare improvers. Bringing a piece of the experience to you, if at all possible.

I felt a new word. And I say "felt" intentionally – because it's a word I knew, but it had never punched me in the face like it did last week. The word is: **agency**. What an awesome word to be punched with. Agency is, very simply, our individual ability to act. It's the combination of our belief, our intent, and our purpose. Agency is what drove 30 people in Tower Hamlets to raise their hands and volunteer to become an improvement coach. Agency is how EQUIP was even born: it is the strength of that fire in your belly. **Agency is the sense that you can**. People with agency expect to succeed – and indeed are more likely to.

High sense of agency is also referred to, elsewhere, as an "internal locus of control". In contrast, people with a more "external locus of control" tend to believe that circumstance would more likely determine success, more than the strength and quality of their own efforts. There is evidence to say that whether your locus of control is more internal or external is influenced by your childhood experiences – yet developing a greater sense of agency is something that is possible at all ages. Has anyone read the little masterpiece that is Carol Dweck's book on [growth mindset](#)?

Little honesty pill: one of the biggest and most common challenges we meet in creating change in local practices is, still today, the sense of "being done to from the outside", and the corrosive belief that until what is outside gets sorted (ie "when we

have more resource”), there is no sense in changing what is inside. That the problem is with the government, the world, or, worst of all, with the patients who just don’t “get it”. Which is about as true as the fact that the problem is with you when your train is delayed and you want it to be on time. If anything, the *solution* is with our patients. But that’s another email.

This is not especially unusual: within working environments, only about 18% of people are “paddlers”. And 18% is enough to keep the boat moving, even enough to row stronger than the pirates (15%). What’s important, however, is that that the 18% grows – that sense of individual agency prospers and develops in time, alongside the understanding that:

- No one is going to improve our work for us – it’s part of our own core job
- If you *really* want to see change, you’re the only place you can guarantee this to happen

Because we totally DO have the power to change things. A little agency goes a long way. If you think your power is limited, if you feel the movement isn’t strong enough, read on.....:

Research with groups shows a 25%-10%-3% pattern:

25% When a minority group pushing change was below 25% of the total group, its efforts failed. But when they reached 25%, the majority of the population adopted the new way of thinking very quickly

10% When just 10% of the population holds an unshakeable belief (other than Brexit, I LOVE this!!), their belief is likely to be accepted by the majority

3% Typically in organizations, around 3% of people (the informal influencers – you know who these are!) drive conversations and influence 85% of other people. They are not typically the senior leaders

One of the most inspirational people at this forum, for me, was Göran Henriks, the Chief Executive of Learning and Innovation at Qulturum in Region Jönköping County, Sweden. He holds the winning combination of being a psychologist with a Master's degree in Business Administration – talk about “doing your job, and learning to do it better”. And he left us with a wonderful thought:

“When I see people act resiliently I see:

- *That they accept situations beyond their control*
- *That they have come to terms with the fact that people including themselves can make errors, or do the wrong thing*
- *That they can act and purposely shift a situation: they are capable of turning the page”*

In other words, resilient people exercise **agency**. And your agency is contagious, since “*ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread just like viruses do*”. (Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*)

And in Tower Hamlets, that is *great* news. Hats off to the sense of agency that we are growing and nurturing together: because we **can**.

Virginia