

## S E S S I O N 7

# How Will We Find Shared Meaning?

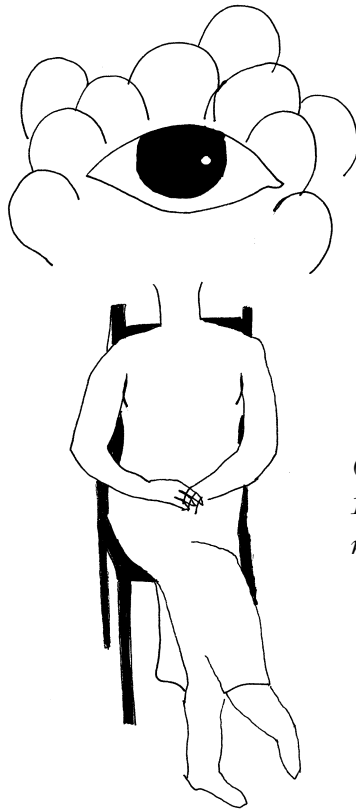
### Session Objectives

- To explore strategies for finding shared meaning among a group's or organization's members.
- To determine ways of reaching a shared vision through participatory processes.
- To consider how organizations can share their vision with others in order to benefit a wider constituency.

### Suggestions for Facilitation

Read aloud the following story about the origins of a campaign by poor, self-employed women garbage collectors in Ahmedabad, India, to improve their social and economic status. Discuss among the group how the garbage collectors were able to identify a shared vision and took steps to make it a reality.

For this session, facilitation methods such as role playing or creating drawings and cartoons might bring the participants closer to the story of the women in India. These tactics may also spark interesting discussions among the participants (see Appendix B for more details).



## The Campaign of the Arogya Bhaginis

*In India, more than 94 percent of the female labor force is self-employed and faces privations exacerbated by women's economic and social vulnerability.*

*Among these women are service providers engaged in manual work such as pulling handcarts, fulfilling domestic chores, and collecting garbage.*

*In 1994, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a registered trade union in India since 1972, launched a campaign to address the needs of self-employed women garbage workers, most of whom are extremely poor and illiterate.*

*SEWA began its effort by consulting with the women and local leaders. Through numerous meetings at the village and neighborhood level, the consensus grew that there were three key challenges to raising the status of women garbage workers: (1) improving the*

*low and intermittent pay of garbage collection work; (2) reducing the health hazards posed by collecting garbage; and (3) reducing the risks to the children of workers who do not have the benefit of child care.*

*In the city of Ahmedabad, many meetings were held with garbage workers to raise awareness and identify labor issues specific to their community. SEWA coordinated health and sanitation classes for its local members and discussed strategies with them for improving their social and economic status. In meetings, classes, and ongoing consultations, the garbage workers formulated a core set of values and principles in which they all had a stake. Out of these principles the garbage workers began to clarify their priorities and shape a common vision around which they could mobilize. From among the garbage workers, the paper pickers who collect and recycle dry garbage and who are often discriminated against and despised as scavengers and spreaders of disease came together to launch an effective campaign for their rights.*

*The paper pickers began by organizing their efforts so that each person would have an area of her own that she would be responsible to keep clean. In return, every house in a participating community was supplied with a*

*refuse bag to be replaced when filled. Those who collect the garbage through this program still make their income from reselling the marketable dry waste, but their presence is perceived as beneficial to the communities in which they work.*

*The women involved in the Ahmedabad campaign are now recognized as Arogya Bhaginis, or Health Sisters, and their collaboration with the representatives of the middle class communities in which they work has drawn the support of a Supreme Court-appointed committee. The Arogya Bhaginis initiated a second effort to mobilize 400 of their sisters who eke out a living at the city's main garbage dump. Like the paper pickers, the women who work at the dump search daily through refuse for resalable items. Many of the women must work with their infants and young children by their side, exposing themselves and their children to unsanitary conditions. The Arogya Bhaginis are working to create a child care program for the women who work at the dump, and to identify alternative sources of recyclable waste that are safer and more profitable.*

*“There is much to be done in terms of strengthening women’s leadership, confidence, and bargaining power within and outside their homes and their representation in policy-making and decision-making fora,” states SEWA’s literature. Finding shared meaning and then defining a shared vision is a process of consultation and reflection involving the participation of as many people affected as possible. In working on behalf of poor, self-employed women, SEWA emphasizes that it “is their issues, their priorities and needs which should guide and mold the development process . . .”<sup>20</sup>*

## Questions for Discussion

- What is the broad vision behind the work of SEWA? How would you define the organization’s vision?
- How did the women garbage collectors come to identify and articulate their goals? Did the fact that they are women influence the methods they used to identify and achieve their goals? Why or why not?
- How did the paper pickers, or the Arogya Bhaginis, turn their needs into actions?
- In what ways did the Arogya Bhaginis demonstrate leadership? What value do you see in their kind of leadership? How do the models of leadership you have experienced differ from this particular model of leadership?

<sup>20</sup> The information on the Self Employed Women’s Association is from <http://www.sewa.org>.

- How were they able to share their vision?
- How did having a flexible and changing shared vision affect their welfare?
- What were the different stages of change through which SEWA's vision passed as it evolved?
- Is having a shared vision always possible and/or desirable? Why?
- What are some obstacles to developing a shared vision among diverse groups or even like-minded groups/individuals? How would you overcome them?

## **Group Activity: Identifying a Group Vision through Shared Meaning**

*Allow approximately one hour for this group activity.*

*In Session 3 participants were asked to write personal vision statements. For this exercise, the facilitator will return those written statements to their authors. (You may wish to break the group into smaller teams. See Appendix B for some suggestions.)*

Creation of shared meaning is an adaptive and flexible approach to goal setting that is influenced by a group's composition and continued communication over time. When a group creates shared meaning, each member operates within a framework in which she shares ownership and responsibility. In this exercise, workshop participants will describe to each other the values and experiences that led them to their personal vision statement. Their task will be to find the common threads among their values and principles that help them to identify and articulate a shared vision for the group.

1. Return to participants their written personal vision statements from Session 3. Allow a few minutes for group members to refamiliarize themselves with their statements and to reflect on their reasons for formulating their personal vision.
2. Going around the group, participants should read aloud their vision statements, or if they choose to, state a revised version that may fit better with their current ideas and wishes. Briefly (each person should spend no more than five minutes, and even less time if the group is large), participants should next explain what values and experiences led them to their personal vision statement.
3. When everyone has had the opportunity to explain her vision statement, ask the group to consider the following questions (the facilitator or a volunteer should take notes on a chalk board or flip chart):
  - What experiences, perspectives, or shared values did members of the group have in common?
  - Were there personal objectives (relating to one's choices, family, or immediate circumstances) or public objectives (social, political, economic, or other goals for one's community or society) that were similar among the vision statements? If so, what were they?

4. Ask the group to consider possible vision statements around which all the workshop participants can mobilize. The statements may relate to personal goals participants share or public objectives they have in common. Participants will then draft a single statement that the entire group can support and in which everyone has a stake.

*Keep a record of this statement which will be used again in Session 8.*

### **Workshop Evaluation Questions**

The facilitator or a volunteer should take notes on a chalk board or flip chart during the following group discussion.

- What have you learned or achieved in the workshop sessions to-date?
- Have the workshop sessions been structured in an engaging and valuable manner?
- Have the content and issues discussed in each session been helpful?
- Are there ways you would change the structure or content of the workshop sessions?
- Has it been easy to participate in the discussion and exercises?  
Why or why not?
- Have your objectives for the workshop changed since the first session?  
If so, in what way?

### **Questions Around the Group**

- What has been the most valuable discussion, exercise, or activity in the workshop so far?
- What aspect of the workshop sessions do you enjoy the most?

To define and elaborate a purpose

is to engage in a learning process.

At the same time, it is engaging

in exercising power.

**“The Building Blocks of Leadership”**