

The Engagement Jigsaw

The following text is taken from a paper titled 'Men's Health: The Engagement Jigsaw - a 12 Point Plan for Effectively Engaging with Men' by Colin Fowler, Director of 'Know How'.

At the very heart of all this work is the million dollar question: *'Do males really not want to be involved in health programmes and services, or are we not offering them the right things in the right way?'*

This question was partly answered by research into men's attitudes and values in the north of Ireland in 2000 and 2004 (The Male Link 2000, and Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2000 and 2004) which indicated that men do recognise that they have health needs; that their lives would be better if they looked after themselves more; that they would welcome an expanded range of dedicated services. However, the perennial difficulty comes when trying to translate this aspiration into action!

Between 1998 and 2005, Colin Fowler (then Regional Manager of The Men's Project) met with almost 600 organisations, groups and individuals who had developed initiatives for men and boys. During these encounters, a record was kept of the practical advice that these people would give to anyone who is thinking about starting-up a project for males.

'The Engagement Jigsaw' is a distilled list of some of the key principles and practical actions that these workers said had positive outcomes for them. It has, however, been added to and refined since then - as new feedback was received. Of course, not every practitioner mentioned every one of the twelve points.

The 12 Point Plan reflects the applied commonsense of those who have piloted innovative work with men throughout the island of Ireland. However, it is only a sketchy map of what has worked for some people in some situations - it is not a recipe for success for everyone.

Preamble

One of the most consistent of these findings is that most organisations who wish to engage with men start from the wrong place. They begin by focusing upon WHAT they might offer to men rather than exploring WHY and HOW they should do it. Yet, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence to show that if you can get the 'why' and the 'how' right, then anything is possible. To do this, the main things to consider are ...

1. What is your motivation / value base? ...

Start by asking yourself: 'Why do I want to do this?' 'Is it needed?' 'Am I only doing it to get additional resources?' 'Do I want to tick a box on my business plan?' 'Am I starting from the position that men are to blame for their own predicament?' ... Men will want to know your motivation and will easily see through any discrepancies.

Men work best with those who believe that they are people of worth rather than a problem to be solved. Remember, your service might actually be the problem - the men are, potentially, part of the solution.

2. Is your organisation ready? ...

Are you prepared to ask some fundamental questions about your own organisation such as:

- ✓ Is work with men seen as being a 'tag-on' to the core business?
- ✓ Do you have staff and volunteers who really want to do this?
- ✓ Is your current structure / way of working likely to attract or put off men?
- ✓ What do you do / have you done to specifically try to engage with men?
- ✓ Does the images and language in your literature (letters, reports, fliers ...) make it explicit that you want to work with both men and women?
- ✓ Does your office environment reflect the roles / needs / experiences of men (e.g. posters, magazines, signs, sex of people there)?
- ✓ Do you have any written policies which relate to the inclusion of men in your work?
- ✓ Are men involved in the decision-making process within the organisation?
- ✓ Are men central to your work plan or on the periphery of it?
- ✓ Does the whole organisation actively support men's involvement?
- ✓ Is everyone aware that you are hoping to engage with more men?
- ✓ What is your vision for working with men? ...

You might only get one good shot at engaging men.
Therefore, use the tailor's motto: "measure twice and cut once".

3. Can you describe it? ...

Work hard to get a one line definition / description of what you want to do and why you want to do it. Keep it simple - not a long list of strategic targets.

4. Is it normal? ...

Men's biggest fear is that they will be laughed at by other men. They are likely to worry if their attendance will lead to them being branded as 'weak', or 'whingey', or 'effeminate' ... Involvement needs to be sold to them as being important, mainstream and normal.

5. Is it practical and do you have adequate resources? ...

This will obviously affect what - if anything - you can offer. There's no point in raising awareness and enthusiasm, and not being able to follow it up with something practical. For many men, there has to be a focus to an activity and a reason to be there. Men (at least in the early stages of engagement) seem to respond better to programmes which are task-orientated and which meet an immediate and tangible need.

Would you be prepared to offer something especially for men and/or to work with small groups of men rather than working generically? ... However, be aware that there is a danger that putting resources into men's work may be seen as diverting resources away from women's work and, so, may create rivalry and resentment.

6. Where and when will the activity take place? ...

Ask yourself a few basic questions: Is the venue easy to get to? Will the session be held in a familiar setting rather than a threatening one? Is the location seen as 'neutral'? ... In Northern Ireland, men have more anxieties than women about crossing the sectarian divide. Yet we often forget that there are intra-community suspicions and tensions as well. Many men are quite parochial in their outlook. If men won't come to the programme, would you consider bringing the programme to them?

Whether we like it or not, most men are still in paid employment and see their role as a worker as being crucially important. This takes-up a lot of their time, and means that they are not available for long periods. Shift work complicates this issue, and we often forget that many men - like women - have other interests / hobbies which mean that they may be unable to attend activities. There are obvious clashes of interest that we might be able to predict e.g. World Cup, National Ploughing Championships, Grand National, the All-Ireland Final etc. However, we also need to be aware of local traditions and patterns e.g. shopping nights, dog racing events, pigeon fanciers' meetings ...

There is no 'right time' - just a locally assessed best guess compromise. But are you prepared to fit with men's schedules to increase their involvement? One way or the other, we should never forget that if we offer an activity we are actually competing for men's time. Therefore, our option needs to be very attractive indeed.

7. Concepts of 'Want' and 'Need' ...

Many men still feel that their role in life is to be self-sufficient, in control and a provider. Within this mentality, there is little freedom for them to state that they want anything - as this may be seen as a sign of weakness. However, even if they will not come forward to say that they want a programme, they can still be convinced that they need it. The key is to find a 'killer hook' which makes it crucial for them to be involved.

8. Active local advocates / allies and word-of-mouth recruitment ...

Few groups have much success with recruitment by relying on 'cold calling' advertising, or parachuting-in experts from outside the community. Although posters / fliers are useful means to raise awareness of an initiative, and to keep the date / time in people's minds, word-of-mouth promotion is still the most powerful mechanism for engaging with males.

For recruitment potential to be maximised, there is a need for people who hold local credibility and respect to ACTIVELY promote the project. This helps to allay some of the fears that men might have. But, remember: word-of-mouth can also work against you if your programme is not up-to-scratch.

9. Political correctness and the role of Superman ...

If all your recruitment techniques draw a blank, would you be prepared to be less 'politically correct' and to do the wrong deed for the right reason? Would you collude - to some degree - with the image of a macho man, if it would achieve the end you hope for?

Men like to feel needed and useful. They like to help others and feel comfortable in this role. In our modern society, there is no longer any need for a dinosaur hunter or dragon slayer. Yet, many men still long to be the hero of the plot - and working on the checkout till in Dunnes Stores hardly fulfils this destiny!

Give men the opportunity to put their knickers on over their tights, wear a cape, and be superman for the day. Engage them by issuing a challenge. Not only will they feel good about being 'the fixer', but you also give them an excuse to enjoy the activity i.e. 'it wasn't for me, it was for ...'

10. Sex of facilitator ...

Although most women's groups feel that women will respond more positively to female facilitators, it does not always seem to follow that men will, necessarily, respond more positively to male facilitators.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that a person who is perceived as a good group leader (e.g. is knowledgeable, listens well, promotes inclusiveness, creates a safe environment, carries out promises ...) is, in most cases, preferable to one whose only qualification is being the same sex as participants. Indeed, depending on the subject areas to be discussed, a woman might even be preferable as the leader. This may be because the men expect her to show more empathy, compassion and care towards them - rather than playing the male power game of 'sizing each other up'. That said, having other males 'about the place' helps to normalise the experience for many men. The key lesson is: don't be paralysed by waiting for men to do it for themselves.

11. Plan small and realistically ...

We've all become the slaves of the long-term strategic planning process. These plans have their place, and are fine when you are working with a familiar target group. However, they are unhelpful and restrictive when pioneering through uncharted territory.

When you are setting-up a group for women, you might judge your recruitment success by counting on at least two hands. For men, know that 'three's a starting point and five's almost a crowd!' Expect to start small, think short-term, and build slowly. Although you will probably want to visualise the project in the future, be careful not to set such strict long-term targets that you will inevitably fail.

There must be an emphasis on quality rather than quantity - reject the 'bums-on-seats' mentality. Find alternative ways to measure success. Regularly check with the participants / users to make sure that it's going the way they wish it to - don't second guess their opinions. All of this requires a radical re-think of how you plan ahead. Progress is likely to be slow and to move forward in small stages.

12. Take the "Me Test" ...

Having put in all this effort, sit down and ask yourself: *'Would I actually want to take part in this activity / programme myself and would I make time to do so? ...'* If the answer's 'no' - think seriously about starting again and doing something different.



- where there's a will, there's a way!

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