IDENTIFYING BRIGHT SPOTS

Story taken from Switch: How To Change Things When Change is Hard, by Dan & Chip Heath

In 1990, Save the Children, an international organization that helps children in need, sent Jerry Sternin to Vietnam to fight malnutrition. Sternin didn’t speak the language nor know how to fix this enormous problem. He had few staff and resources. Sternin admitted, "We had no idea what we were going to do." Nonetheless, the foreign minister told him, "You have six months to make a difference."

The widespread belief was that malnutrition in Vietnam was the result of myriad problems: poor sanitation, the prevalence of poverty, the lack of clean water, and ignorance about nutrition. For Sternin, this information was “true, but useless”. He knew that if addressing malnutrition required ending poverty and purifying water and building sanitation systems, then it would never happen, given his short timeframe and lack of resources.

Sternin sought bright spots...

Typically, when we analyze a big, complicated problem, like malnutrition or poverty, we seek a solution that matches the size of the problem. We ask: “What’s broken and how do we fix it?” In reality, however, if major changes are needed, then a lot of things are probably wrong. Instead of agonizing over issues that are “true but useless”, we must look for bright spots, or some sign, no matter how small, that things are working. We need to ask ourselves a question that sounds simple, but is not intuitive: “What is already working, and how can we do more of it?”

With this in mind, Sternin traveled to a local village and gathered the mothers together. He asked for their help to find ways to nourish their kids better, and they agreed to help. As the first step, they went out in teams to weigh and measure every child in the village. Then, they analyzed the results.

He asked: "Did you find any very poor children who are bigger and healthier than the typical child?" The women, scanning the data, nodded and said, "yes!"

He then asked, "You mean it’s possible, today in this village, for a very poor family to have a well-nourished child?"

Again, the mothers said: "Yes!" Sternin replied: "Then let’s go see what they’re doing."

Sternin’s strategy was to search the villages for bright spots. If some kids were healthy despite their disadvantages, then that meant that malnourishment wasn’t inevitable. The existence of healthy kids provided hope for a practical, short-term

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solution. Sternin knew he couldn’t fix the big root causes; however, if a handful of kids were healthy despite the problems, why couldn’t every kid be healthy?

**Sternin studied bright spot differences...**

To understand what the “bright spots” were doing differently, they had to understand the typical eating behaviors in the community. Therefore, the mothers talked to dozens of people in the villages. They learned that the norms were for kids to eat twice a day with their families, and to eat food soft, pure foods, like the highest-quality rice, which was deemed appropriate for children. With this information, the mothers then observed the homes of the “bright-spot” kids, and paid attention to any differences.

*Four meals a day:* They noticed that “bright-spot” mothers fed their kids four meals a day, instead of two. They used the same amount of food but just spread it across four meals. The twice-a-day meals eaten by most families, while larger, turned out to be problematic for children, because their under-fed stomachs couldn’t digest so food at one time.

*Different native mixes:* Mothers also learned that the eating style was different. Healthy kids were fed more actively, sometimes by hand. The children were also encouraged to eat when they were sick, which was not the norm. In addition, they were eating different kinds of food. The “bright-spot” mothers mixed shrimp and crabs from rice paddies, as well as sweet potato greens, into their kids’ rice. While these practices were considered strange or “low class,” they added protein and vitamins to these children’s diets, which made a remarkable difference in their health.

As an outsider, Sternin never could have developed this solution on his own. It was a native one, and for that reason, it was realistic as well as sustainable.

**Sternin cloned the bright spots...**

In order to scale this “bright spot” to actually impact child health throughout the country, Sternin knew that telling the mothers about nutrition wouldn’t change their behavior. “Knowledge does not change behavior,” he said. The mothers would have to practice it. They’d have to act differently until different started to feel normal.

Thus, the community designed a program in which 50 malnourished families, would meet at a hut each day and prepare food together, in small groups. The moms “acted their way into a new way of thinking.” Most important was that it was their change, something that arose from the local wisdom of the village. Sternin’s role was only to help them see that they could conquer malnutrition on their own.

The results of identifying and cloning these bright spots was significant: Six months after Sternin’s visit to the Vietnamese village, 65% of the kids were better nourished. Eventually, the practices spread to 265 villages and reached 2.2 million people!

In tough times, we’ll see problems everywhere, and are often paralyzed by the size of the problem and the decision-making process. This is why, in order to make progress on a change, we need crystal-clear direction. We need to know where to go, how to act, and what destination to pursue.

These bits of success, these “bright spots”, can provide a road map for action, and the hope that change is possible. So when YOU are tackling a challenging change, look for “bright spots” that are already happening, and then figure out how to do them more often!