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Evaluating Post-Training Engagement

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Abstract

Impact Launch (IL) is a collective of social impact professionals dedicated to creating sustainable and equitable change. IL provides strategic planning, project design, collaborative capacity building, coaching, and leadership intensives. Similar to those who've undergone other training programs, alumni of IL's leadership training are prone to becoming disengaged with the tools and stagnant in their learning. The purpose of this project was to begin efforts to increase alumni engagement with the tools and each other through conducting a series of interviews. Six alumni were interviewed to collect feedback on how IL can better support engagement. The major expected outcome for this project was that IL will implement at least two of the recommendations from the final data report. The most important findings of this project were that alumni were very interested in remaining engaged with the tools, and there were large calls for a return to in-person gatherings and the creation of a newsletter.

Keywords: engagement, leadership training, continued education

Agency & Communities Served

Impact Launch (IL) is a “collective of social impact professionals dedicated to creating sustainable and equitable change” in the Monterey Bay area (Impact Launch, n.d.). All of the work carried out is based on the Radical Transformational Leadership (RTL) framework created by Dr. Monica Sharma. RTL is built on the theory that everyone is capable of creating sustainable equitable change by grounding themselves in and working from their universal values of compassion, dignity, and equity. IL provides strategic planning, project design, collaborative capacity building, individual and team coaching, and leadership intensive training for leaders, businesses, and organizations (Impact Launch, n.d.). The major population directly served through these efforts include individuals who work as social justice advocates or within businesses, non profit organizations, and local government institutions (i.e. Santa Cruz County Office of Education). Impact Launch has over 900 alumni who have attended the Radical Transformational Leadership intensive training sessions.

The RTL framework and tools were cultivated over the course of twenty years by Dr. Monica Sharma to combat this global feeling of helplessness in the face of crisis. When fully applied, the tools set forth by Dr. Sharma and her collaborators have created profound results in areas where previously it was thought there could be no progress, including the AIDS epidemic (Sharma, 2017, p.108-110). RTL has also been proven to be effective in getting bipartisan support for tackling issues in a sustainable and equitable way (Sharma, 2017).

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

Similar to those who’ve undergone other training programs, RTL alumni are more prone to becoming stagnant in their learning when they do not come together to practice the tools

(Gonzalez & Trinity, 2022). The current state of the world is undeniably bleak, and many people view themselves as helpless bystanders who can have no impact on creating change. Providing the RTL tools through intensive training and strategic planning has been proven to be effective in helping individuals find solutions for the social issues they're trying to address (Sharma, 2017). However, the issue remains that when alumni fall out of touch with the tools they fall back into unsustainable patterns and will likely not see the change they wish to. The prevalence of hopelessness and burnout in the face of seemingly unending societal injustice can cause a cycle of health and human services professionals working only to address the result of the issue, not the root cause (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Compass, 2022; Thwink, n.d.). With these impartial short term solutions, lasting change becomes further out of reach for everyone.

Contributing Factors

COVID-19

The COVID-19 epidemic was the cause of innumerable difficulties and a major spike in burnout and fatigue among service providers. With everyone having to undergo the sudden shift to working electronically from home, many have lost their connection, their drive, and their motivation, with over half of adults reporting negative mental health impacts (Kalwani, 2021, para. 7). Societal burnout has also become widespread with many facing emotional exhaustion due to the pandemic and the vast amount of civil unrest and trauma entrenched in the U.S. (Peinado & Anderson, 2020). RTL is a way of doing things differently, and it takes a high level of engagement with the tools to create sustainable and equitable solutions to social issues. During this time of global distress and burnout many people were struggling to maintain the bare minimum of their work and come up with fast solutions to address the littiny of immediate problems caused by the pandemic. alumni of RTL training and those working at Impact Launch

are no exception to this phenomenon. During the pandemic, the Quarterly RTL alumni Gatherings had to be canceled and re-designed to be conducted online via Zoom. RTL alumni gatherings didn't resume until June of 2022, with the first gathering having a participant list of less than 30 people.

Lack of Alumni Availability/Interest

Continued attendance of RTL training and gatherings is by choice, not as a work requirement. RTL alumni engagement is therefore directly influenced by the level of availability and interest of each individual. Gatherings and training sessions cannot feasibly be made to fit into every individual's schedule, so many are unable to attend due to schedule conflicts (Gonzalez & Trinity, 2022). Others are uninvested or uninterested in continuing to be engaged with RTL. An integral aspect of RTL is the use of Pods for alumni to come together in groups of three to discuss their learning and work together to remain engaged with the tools. A survey sent out to alumni found that among those who responded, 72% no longer met with their pods. Of those who no longer meet with their pods, 30% cited a lack of time and energy as the reason and 40% reported that their pod members stopped responding (Gonzalez & Trinity, 2022). It's also important to note that of the hundreds of alumni, only 38 responded to the survey (8 in Spanish, 30 in English).

Lack of Staff

Limited staffing greatly influences the level of impact an organization can have due to the increased workload for employees (Pukhovskaya et al., 2020). As a local grassroots organization, Impact Launch has minimal employees, and a lack of bilingual employees. There are three senior practitioners of RTL, six practitioners and 3 interns (Impact Launch, n.d.). Five of the six practitioners are new hires and long-time alumni of RTL, and only four speak Spanish. Together

this team conducts all of the work needed to gain funding and conduct training sessions, alumni gatherings, strategic planning, and information sessions. To conduct one alumni gathering requires an extensive list of tasks including: identifying speakers to highlight, creating and sending out an announcement and reminders for the event, scheduling, identifying a Spanish interpreter, and creating the agenda (Joseph et al., 2022). Throughout the year one of the quarterly gatherings are being planned at any given point in time. Until the recent addition of 5 new practitioners, this small piece of the work was being conducted by only four people.

Consequences

Alumni No Longer Applying Tools

Individuals who have undergone training but do not go through continued learning courses have been found to become less likely to remember and/or use the tools they learned (Gallagher, 2007). With RTL this likelihood increases due to the need for in-depth involvement with the tools on a regular basis. A survey found that approximately 44% of alumni reported using the tools monthly, 34% reported daily use, and 20% reported weekly use. 75% of respondents also reported interest in having access to RTL tips and content reminders (Gonzalez & Trinity). There is also such a vast network of RTL alumni that there have been occasions where two individuals work together for over a month before realizing that they both have gone through RTL training. In these cases alumni are missing the opportunity to collaborate in using the RTL tools for their project.

Lack of Communication Among Alumni

Part of the lack of engagement of alumni is the lack of communication among them as is evidenced by the large number who reported no longer meeting with their pods (Gonzalez & Trinity, 2022). There is an alumni only forum and a public blog available through the Impact Launch website, neither of which have more than 10 posts (Impact Launch, n.d.). There's also an

active phenomenon in the world of human and health services where many different organizations will be attempting to provide the same services to a demographic, but each different resource is difficult to access and utilize. This is defined by Dr. Sharma as working in silos (Sharma, 2017). One of the tools of RTL is to focus on collaborative work between different entities in order to properly and fully meet the needs of the population being served. When alumni are not engaged with this tool they are more inclined to fall back into older habits for achieving fast, short term solutions without collaborating outside of their organization (Iqbal & Dastgeer, 2017). The purpose of RTL becomes lost when alumni continue to work in silos rather than collaboration to find transformative solutions.

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Lack of staff	RTL alumni are more prone to becoming stagnant in their learning	Alumni no longer applying RTL tools
Lack of availability/interest on behalf of Alumni		Lack of communication among alumni
COVID		

Project Description

Project Description

There are a number of strategies in place to promote engagement among RTL alumni including the quarterly gatherings, pods, the alumni forum and public blog. These strategies have been largely ineffective for a number of reasons including COVID, lack of employees, and lack of alumni availability/interest. It was decided that the most effective way to begin efforts to increase engagement would be through collecting feedback from alumni on how they feel they could be better supported. In order to achieve this task a group of alumni were chosen to interview to receive in depth feedback and ideas for engagement. A previous survey was also

used to inform the questions asked during the interviews. Once the interviews were finished, the data was synthesized into a report and strategic plan recommendation.

Project Justification

In order to increase alumni engagement, those at Impact Launch reverse designed the project by identifying the required outcomes. To identify why previous efforts to foster engagement have not had the desired effect, there needs to be feedback from alumni on how they feel they can be better supported. It's common knowledge in the field of human services that to properly address an issue, the affected community must be actively involved in the solution making process (Sharma, 2017). By collecting alumni feedback there has been an increase in awareness of the level of interest of alumni which has allowed the project to move forward by focusing on how to circumvent the issue of alumni availability for engagement. The data report will allow those within IL to identify the areas with the greatest reported need, and address those needs accordingly. The data report will also ease the workload of the Practitioners by providing clear achievable tasks to reach the overall goal of increasing alumni engagement.

The concept that continued education is an integral part of providing human services is far from new. When people do not participate in continued learning they are prone to forget the things they once learned, and may miss out on opportunities to apply new learning to new problems arising in society. Continued education is considered so vital that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states that all social workers should "demonstrate awareness" and be committed to lifelong learning (2022, Section 4.01). Without continued learning, those who are striving to create change in their communities will continue to face unnecessary hardships in their efforts.

Benefits

Through this project a platform for alumni engagement will be identified and established to create a space for collaboration and continued learning of the RTL tools. Continued education has been positively correlated with a number of benefits including individual openness to change, improved quality of life, enhanced understanding of the world, and the improvement of professional service delivery (Mueller & King, 2018, p.3). More immediate benefits will include alumni moving from working in silos to utilizing collaborative strategies. Increase in alumni collaboration could also lead to a positive impact on the communities they're serving because of how successful RTL can be in fostering equitable, sustainable change.

Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes

In order for this project to successfully increase engagement there needed to be a certain level of interest on behalf of the alumni, and flexibility among the staff. The desired number of interviews to be conducted was a minimum of ten. The purpose of these interviews was to collect feedback for improvement from the alumni on how to better support them in using the RTL tools, and gauge their level of interest and current engagement. Once the staff at Impact Launch receive the data report they can either accept or reject the feedback. Expected outcomes for the success of this project were that the minimum number of interviews would be reached, and that IL would accept the feedback and implement at least two of the recommendations.

Implementation Process

This research project was created with the intention of assessing the effectiveness of Impact Launch's engagement of alumni, and to identify effective ways to increase engagement.

The necessary steps to carry out this project included creating interview questions, conducting a series of key informant interviews, creating a report of the feedback, and forming actionable recommendations based on the interviewee responses. The interview questions were created in collaboration among the team members of IL, and a list of potential interviewees was generated. The alumni chosen to be interviewed varied in their level of engagement with RTL in order to gain a wider range of feedback. Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes to an hour each, and were conducted during the months of June through September. Once the interviews were completed the responses were analyzed and organized into a feedback report for Impact Launch.

Project Results

The expected outcomes of this project were to have an abundance of feedback to give to the founders of Impact Launch to inform future decisions of how to support and promote alumni diversity and engagement. Since the success of this project and those that will follow was largely contingent on whether the alumni were interested in continued engagement, two of the interview questions were designed to gauge the level of interest of the interviewees. Based on the responses to the questions shown in Table 1 below, it was concluded that alumni had at least a moderate level of interest in remaining engaged with the RTL tools and each other. Each of the interviewees expressed enthusiasm for a newsletter, even those who reported being highly unengaged. Each interviewee also reported time being a major boundary to them remaining engaged, and provided ideas to counteract time constraints.

Table 1*Alumni Response Themes Relevant to Level of Interest*

Questions	Response Themes
How engaged are you with RTL alumni events What works for you? What doesn't work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Loud call for returning to in person ● Scheduling conflicts/ large time commitment ● Alumni Gatherings are inspirational ● Requests for more frequent, short refresher gatherings ● Having a way to indicate alumni are certified in RTL ● Requests for evening and weekend classes
Would you be interested in engagement outside of gatherings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enthusiasm for newsletter ● Request for video highlights of how to use tools ● Create web portal for tools and resources for alumni within Impact Launch website

Note. This table only contains the responses that addressed the level of interest on behalf of the interviewees. The complete feedback report can be found in Appendix B.

The success of this is also measured by the implementation of feedback. As the interviews occurred, an overview of the results were shared with Impact Launch. They integrated some of this feedback right away. This included reminding alumni during meetings about the forum and upcoming events as many were uninformed due to lack of knowledge of the forum and emails going to spam. Additionally, most of the feedback was accepted. Some of it included things that may take awhile to implement like newsletters or in-person gatherings. Ideally, it will be put into action sooner rather than later, but within the next few years.

In total, six interviews were conducted via Zoom, and two more alumni provided brief feedback via email. The desired number of interviews was not reached mostly due to scheduling conflicts and time restraints of the project. However, the final data report is a robust 2.5 pages full of varying feedback and ideas for improvement.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The contributing factors make improving the issue of engagement difficult. In person trainings have been reported as being desired through the interviews, but COVID and other arising concerns have made this difficult. Maintaining engagement is also incredibly burdensome due to the disproportionate ratio of workload to number of staff. The results validated what Impact Launch already knew and has been working on including increased racial diversity and difficulties with email communication. The feedback gathered also confirmed the identification of availability of alumni as a contributing factor to lack of engagement. However, the feedback report also brought up suggestions that were less well received and may be overlooked.

The interviews opened up many doors for change. Three recommendations were made to Impact Launch. The first was to create a quarterly alumni newsletter that is no longer than two pages to spotlight different tools, remind alumni of how to use them, and highlight how other alumni are using tools. The second recommendation was to create tool refresher videos that are about 10 minutes to one hour long. The final recommendation was to increase focus on strategic planning within different organizations rather than on providing wide spread trainings. The recommendation for a newsletter was accepted, however whether or not it will be successfully implemented is not yet known. In order to increase the potential of this project, the outreach and scheduling process could have been expedited by sending out more invitations to a larger number of alumni at a time. Also, interviewing alumni that are more engaged seemed to be the interviews with more substance and recommendations. Increasing the number of engaged alumni could result in more diverse feedback. Increasing diversity in ways such as age, race, and language spoken could have the potential for different aspects of input as well.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Met to decide how to begin project	Project design	May 11, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to build CSFR and base for interview questions	Conscious Full Spectrum Response form	May 24, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Created interview questions	List of questions for alumni interviews	May 25, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to plan for June gathering and receive feedback on interview questions	Final interview questions and June gathering agenda	June 1, 2022	Megan Joseph
Scheduled with alumni	Emails, google calendar invite	June 1, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted first interview (A. S.)	Alumni feedback	June 9, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to debrief interview	Recommendations for engagement	June 28, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to discuss next interviewees	Alumni feedback	July 24, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Scheduled with alumni	Emails, google calendar invite	July 24, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted second interview (C. K.W.)	Alumni feedback	August 2, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to debrief interview, discuss next steps	Recommendations for engagement	September 1, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted third interview (S. B.)	Alumni feedback	September 15, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted fourth interview (C. S.)	Alumni feedback	September 19, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Edited interview questions for Jacob	New interview questions	September 19, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted fifth interview (J. M.)	Alumni feedback	September 26, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Conducted sixth interview (H. J.)	Alumni feedback	September 28, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to debrief interviews	Recommendations for engagement	October 12, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph

POST-TRAINING ENGAGEMENT

Synthesized interview responses	Data report, strategic plan	October - November	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph
Met to deliver Feedback Report	Recommendations for engagement	November 9, 2022	Robyn McKeen, Megan Joseph

Appendix B

Alumni Feedback Report

How to read response themes:

- Bullet points = in order of frequency
- Bold = considered very important

Questions:	Response Themes:
<p>How engaged are you with RTL alumni events What works for you? What doesn't work?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Loud call for returning to in person - hard to be engaged and focused on zoom ● Scheduling conflicts as barrier to attending alumni gatherings ● Returning to attend cohorts/PC requires a major time commitment that many cannot give ● Alumni Gatherings are inspirational ● Alumni not receiving emails ● Requests for more frequent, short refresher gatherings with intersession format to remind alumni how to use tools in realistic/relatable/consumable forms ● Having a way to indicate alumni are certified in RTL training (i.e.through email signature line) ● Requests for evening and weekend classes
<p>How can we better support alumni use of tools?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alumni have forgotten most of the tools other than listening deeply, grounding in stand, background conversations, and feedback format ● Create an opportunity for alumni to pause and reflect ● Shared examples by Robyn/Megan/Shebreh could be more in-depth to show the process of their efforts not just the results (show the ugly/hard side of things)- request for more examples of modest change, "keeping it real" ● Practicing tools in speed dating format - alumni group does refreshers everyone gets to practice more than once on each tool - chance to practice with different people ● Use current events within the community being engaged in the respective cohort/gathering as examples for use of tools
<p>We're working to increase practices around racial</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More diverse practitioner coaches and staff ● More focus on LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities - having gatherings or trainings focused towards serving different minority groups- partner with organizations that

<p>equity and cultural competency</p>	<p>serve those groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase Latinx engagement in California cohorts to better represent and serve community ● Interruption statement - used to interrupt meetings or situations can clarify/correct the lens in question - empowers people to step into a space of self acknowledgment ● Have person of color interview other people to talk about why they lost interest (direct follow up) one on one comfortable conversation on why the program didn't resonate ● Need for white accountability as system that needs to be included and addressed - would like to see leaders look at their own comfort level with defaulting of systems to center around whiteness as privilege - calling out systems and still reflect on white accountability ● Being able to pod with people from same racial/ethnic backgrounds helps connectivity of BIPOC
<p>Would you be interested in engagement outside of gatherings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enthusiasm for newsletter - Visuals and auditory for all types of learners (i.e. podcasts, videos, newsletters with visuals/audio having transcripts for accessibility)- sharing two pagers that focuses in on different skills, leadership, shared understanding, participatory strategies ● Request for video highlights of how to use tools (from a few minutes to an hour long) ● Social media platforms not particularly desirable for engagement ● Create web portal for tools and resources for alumni within Impact Launch website (similar to SUTRA for Marin LEO cohort)
<p>Do you still meet with your Pod?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pods are useful and well liked ● Pods have limitations - can get stuck, become chaotic/hectic, members stop responding, stop meeting due to scheduling conflicts ● Providing more clear way for alumni to form new pods - (link at bottom of newsletter) ● Helpful to pod with people working in similar areas/on similar projects
<p>Do you know about the alumni-only page on our site?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alumni did not know about alumni only page ● Not likely to utilize alumni page or blog

<p>Anything else:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating specific focus trainings for different age groups/ work areas (RTL for young professionals, senior leaders, executive directors, etc.) - young professionals have more time on their hands and can attend full training, senior professionals have less time to attend during the week ● Need for more funding to support Impact Launch in engaging alumni ● Alumni highlights need to be less glorifying - SC is in a competitive mindset of who's "RTL enough" - We're not all champions which is okay! ● Turn focus away from trainings and towards strategic planning ● Intersectionality of good facilitation is confused with someone being biased- Shame and ego are a huge part that hold us back ● Debriefing as PCs is helpful ● How to do no harm: be careful with examples used during meetings as they can open trauma wounds without closing them before moving onto the next topic
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