

L'ARBRE À PALABRES

STORIES UNDER THE BAOBAB

In many villages of Africa, when the seething afternoon sun becomes unbearable, folks will gather under the « *arbre à palabres* », a big tree — usually a baobab — where they sit and listen to stories from the elders. We will use *Stories Under the Baobab* to tell stories of our struggles, and look at what makes our efforts successful.



Participants think about campaigns, tactics or behaviours that were successful in terms of social change goals, and others that were perhaps not as successful but were a source of important learning about what works. Then, participants are asked to write a couple words on coloured "post-it" notes: one (preferably a green post-it) for the effective action/campaign, the other (possibly an orange or yellow post-it) for the not so effective one. They tell a short story of their experience when they bring their "leaves" to the tree (one story per person).

After enough stories are told, we look at the ingredients of success.

GOAL

- To elicit knowledge around campaign building, strategic planning, effectiveness in a long-term, social change perspective

SET-UP

- One large drawing of a barren tree, with many branches and lots of space on the ground.
- Green and yellow (orange is good too) "Post-It" notes for all participants.

FACILITATION STEPS

- Tell people we are going to look at what we know about effective strategies and tactics. Emphasize that we want to look at our own experience. Ask people to think about the experiences they have had: campaigns they participated in, meetings or demonstrations they attended, actions or interactions.
- Show them the picture of the tree. Tell them this is « *L'arbre à palabres* », the Baobab tree, where we will come and share our stories of successful actions and not-so-successful actions or campaigns.
 - In Africa, there is a tradition called « *l'arbre à palabres* » (the stories tree). First, you need a big tree, one that gives lots of shade, because it gets hot during the day.
 - Under that big tree, villagers gather during their free time to listen to stories from other village folks. We are going to use that tree today to find out from the wealth of experience in this room, what are some of the ingredients for successful campaigns.

- ❑ Tell them we are going to put leaves on that tree.
 - Green, healthy leaves, successful actions, will go on the branches, in the tree.
 - Yellow (or orange) leaves will represent the actions and campaigns that did not go so well. But as you know, sometimes some of our best lessons come from turning our failures into successes. Yellow or orange leaves go on the ground and will nourish the tree.
 - ✓ There, the leaves will be composted – there are many lessons to draw from attempts that appear to us like failures sometimes. The only way to be successful is to make mistakes, so we can learn. Sometimes, even, we think we have failed, but we have in fact achieved tremendous successes in relation to goals that we perhaps did not clearly articulate.
- ❑ Tell them we are going to look at effective actions, campaigns, gestures, ideas, behaviours we have been involved in, or witnessed, in the past.
 - Tell them they should write down a title (in a word or two) on a Post-It note about an effective (green leaf) or less effective (yellow/orange leaf) action or tactic. Ask them to think of a specific example. Tell them that we would prefer real-life experience.
 - Tell them they will be invited to place that leaf within the tree (green leaf) or at the foot of the tree (yellow/orange leaf).
- ❑ Ask them to think and choose one story to share with the whole group.
 - Depending on group size, tell them that not everybody may have a chance to share their story.

STORY-TELLING

- ❑ Give them 4 or 5 minutes to think about their stories and write its title on the post-its.
 - Distribute post-it notes during that time.
- ❑ Invite participants who want to share their story to come under the tree and lay it where it belongs (branch or ground).
 - In a large group, you may want to tell participants they have one minute to explain their experience. You may also interview them, so that you may probe deeper into certain ones.
- ❑ While stories are being told, a second facilitator distils and writes down "Key success factors" on a flip-chart that participants cannot yet see (have flip chart facing away from participants).
- ❑ End by revealing the key success factors and, if time allows, invite discussion.

VARIATIONS

- ❑ Such a process would take longer, but it would be preferable if participants looked for the success factors themselves.
- ❑ Force-field analysis could also be used to look at ways to reduce ineffectiveness and strengthen effectiveness.