HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Side Event

THE NEW SCHOOL
PARSONS

PRESENCING INSTITUTE

UNDP

LEARNING INSIGHTS:
LEADING SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN THE DECADE OF ACTION

Wednesday, 14 July 2021

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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TODAY'S AGENDA

Opening remarks:
- Haoliang Xu (UNDP)

Panel on the Action Learning Lab:
- Laurel Patterson (UNDP)
- Otto Scharmer (MIT, Presencing Institute)
- Mariam Kakkar (UNHCR)

Experiences from the Lab:
- Nicole Anand (UNDP, The New School) and Learning Sciences Team (Lucas Vaqueiro, Julia Wieslawa Szagdaj and Sudeepti R. Bhatnagar)
- Karuna Kumar (UNDP Asia-Pacific)

Closing remarks: Taking learning to the next level
- Otto Scharmer (MIT, Presencing Institute)
- Laurel Patterson (UNDP SDGi)

Methodology

Broadest level of inquiry:

1. Understanding the preconditions for growing systems leadership capabilities
2. Identifying possible pathways for building systems transformation capabilities
3. Exploring how systems capabilities change over time

Assessment Areas: leading and change; systems and values; learning and practice.

OBSERVATION OF 3 WORKSHOPS
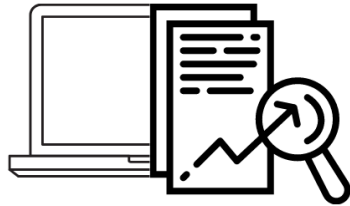
WHATSAPP & SPARKBLUE FORUMS
4 MONTHS OF MESSAGES

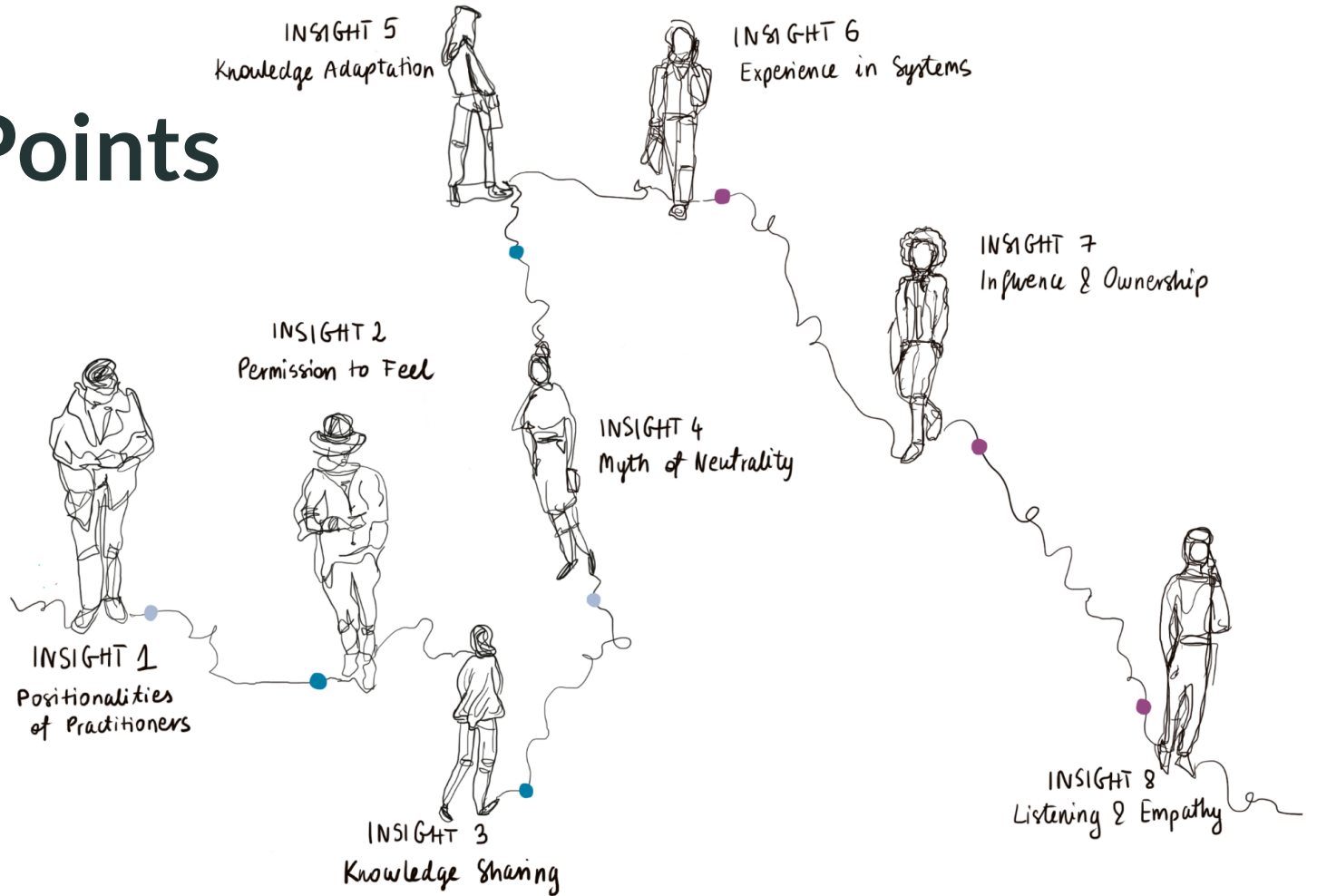SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
17 PARTICIPANTS

SURVEY
94 RESPONSES

SEMI-STRUCTURED
FOCUS GROUP
1 LAB TEAM

Leverage Points & Insights

INSIGHT 5
Knowledge Adaptation

INSIGHT 6
Experience in Systems

INSIGHT 7
Influence & Ownership

INSIGHT 2
Permission to Feel

INSIGHT 4
Myth of Neutrality

INSIGHT 1
Positionalities
of Practitioners

INSIGHT 3
Knowledge Sharing

INSIGHT 8
Listening & Empathy

EXPERTISE / LIVED EXPERIENCE   EAGERNESS / PERMISSION TO LEAD   REFLECTION / PRACTICAL APPLICATION

INSIGHT 1
POSITIONALITY OF PRACTITIONERS

Different positionalities – understandings of the world based on personal values, views, and location in time and space – of UN practitioners who participated in the Action Learning Lab influence how they theorize change, understand, and act in systems. This creates a myriad of expressions of what 'systems' are, and contributes to differing preferences on how to engage in learning about them.

INSIGHT 2
PERMISSION TO FEEL

When UN practitioners perceive spaces to be different than other UN spaces, such as the Action Learning Lab, they feel that they've been granted permission to be vulnerable. Practitioners who see these types of spaces as unique, point to an acceleration of relationship building within them and a potential for the space to provide a sense of belonging for participants. In these same spaces, other UN practitioners feel discomfort with the examples, activities, and asks of them to participate. These practitioners point to dissonances experienced due to culture and language, and missed expectations of the space to deliver practical methods.

INSIGHT 3
KNOWLEDGE SHARING

UN Practitioners seeking to upskill in systems leadership often make implicit references to a personal-work divide, and they associate '"inner transformation"' learning with a personal environment. Some practitioners place a high value on reflective learning spaces, indicating how the Action Learning Lab helped them gain clarity about their priorities and goals. At the same time, a majority of research respondents identified uncertainties about how to share knowledge from the lab with colleagues, and carry over their experience into their work.

INSIGHT 4
MYTH OF NEUTRALITY

Some Global South and BIPOC UN practitioners identify a '"myth of neutrality"' in approaches to systems transformation, particularly as taught through a Western lens without unpacking its foundational entanglement with inequality and structural racism. These practitioners stated how the Western approach is one that poses explanations, while for them, systems transformation is experienced with little need for explanation.

INSIGHT 5
KNOWLEDGE ADAPTATION

Despite widespread acceptance that adaptations are needed when learning new ideas and methods, UN practitioners expressed a high degree of uncertainty about how to apply what they were learning in the lab in their work environments. Furthermore, they feel conflicted about who has the responsibility to translate and spread learnings from the lab, questioning whether or not it is their role or if others should create these bridges.

INSIGHT 6
EXPERIENCE IN SYSTEMS

UN practitioners that consider themselves advanced systems thinkers seek to learn how to act in systems. They display an eagerness to get to the applications in context and to better understand the 'how to' of systems practice. At the same time, some practitioners that present as novices to systems thinking, demonstrated an acceptance of starting with situating themselves in systems to explore sophisticated actions later.

INSIGHT 7
INFLUENCE & OWNERSHIP

UN practitioners participating in the Action Learning Lab expressed desires to own change processes. At the same time, they showcased doubts in their level of influence to do so, and a tendency to look for leaders outside of themselves to provide an invitation and permission to lead a process. A group of practitioners referenced fears they have that encourages them to ask for permissions to lead.

INSIGHT 8
LISTENING & EMPATHY

A significant number of UN practitioners who participated in the Action Learning Lab said that listening and developing empathy are valuable inner transformation practices that strengthen the connection between them and others. Some practitioners said listening is a good first step for systems transformation because it helps to create connections between otherwise very different roles, expertises, and focal areas. Practitioners remain divided on the meaning of listening and empathy, and hence applications of it for systems transformation also vary.

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THANK YOU!

CONTACT US:
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