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Pragati: Strategy for Engaging Influential Community People

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Why Engage Influential People?

The involvement of influential people in encouraging family planning use as well as in influencing the social norms and acceptability associated with family planning is key to increasing family planning use more widely and among harder to reach groups. Emphasis on this involvement is based on the recognition that people are more likely to accept guidance or advice from*:

- people they know and like
- people they respect or who respect and appreciate them
- people with informal and/or more formal authority in the community, and
- people that they perceive as similar to themselves

It is important to note that influential people may have positions of power or titles in the formal structure, but often, people with informal power or recognition may be more influential. These are people who influence others through their charisma, leadership, or who they are without necessarily holding formal positions in society.

There are several parameters to keep in mind as we work with influential people:

- We are bringing in influential people as allies – people who can recognize something that will be beneficial in their community, and can bring their influence to bear. We provide information to open a dialogue around what they can do as a leader to help.
- Consistent with the “reflection and action” rather than a message approach to behavior change, we are encouraging leaders to support exploration and reflection in their communities.
- Both formal leaders (people who have formal leadership roles in the community) and informal leaders (people who have social standing or respect in the community, but who may not be “official” or rich. Often the informal leaders may be the most influential.
- We are NOT:
 - Recruiting leaders to carry out activities for us, nor are we defining how they will take action.
 - Expecting leaders to tell people to participate in specific activities or to follow specific behaviors

How to Identify Influential People

While a more comprehensive social mapping exercise may be ideal, this is an abbreviated approach to catalyze the engagement process. Following this somewhat formal process helps to avoid “outsider” assumptions about who is influential based on their title, economic or educational status, or formal role in the community. By asking for confirmation from more than one discussion group, there is also a validation component to the process.

By going through this process, we are hoping to identify and validate the people in the community that are:

- Liked and respected in the community and from whom people would be happy to listen to information they may have to share

* Cialdiani, RB. *Influence: Science and Practice*. 4th ed. Allyn & Bacon; 2000

- Representative of the project beneficiaries, in demographics and social standing. Women, for example, tend to listen to other female community leaders when they share an opinion.
- Considered to be role models for younger men and women
- Contributing positively to life in the community
- Have supportive attitudes towards family planning as a way to improve the lives of people in the community without being imposing

However selection is done, it is important to listen to the community members' ideas on who is influential, and not go in with pre-determined ideas.

While consultation with existing group partners, schoolteachers, or elders may be helpful, it is important to remember that we are looking for individuals the community finds influential. It is easy to fall back on existing groups that the implementer may already be working with, or to assume that people who have influential positions in the formal structures or with formal titles are appropriate, but it is important to find a way to validate their actual influence with people in the community.

The specific proposed identification process entails the following steps:

1. Start with a gathering place such as a market or *chawk* in the community and ask a group of a few people to identify two or three women and men whom they consider influential, respectable, and a person of good character in the community.

If they need more guidance, suggest that these people are respected by many people and that many people regard them so highly that they are likely to follow their example or advice. They can be ordinary people like neighbors or teachers but have all of these characteristics. Thank that group of men or women and move to the next group.

2. Select 1 – 2 more *chawks* or gathering places with a small group of people. Ask the same questions as the first round, noting which names appear on more than one list. Continue the exercise until you have a good list of influential people.
3. To confirm the names on the list, approach another group and ask if you can read a list of community names to them. After reading the names identified on your list, ask them if there is anyone in the community more respected than the people on the list. If so, ask them to name that person. Use this last group to validate the list you have, or to point you in directions to refine the list further.
4. Continue canvassing the community until you are confident you have a list of influential community members.

What Can Influential People Do?

While the specific role or activities for influential people will be unique based on how their influence manifests in the community, it is important to remember that we are encouraging these people to purposefully think about how they exert their influence and how they can enhance both family planning acceptability and use and improve reproductive health in their community. This is a different role than that of a promoter because it draws on leadership and influence that is already established.

Following are some ideas or possibilities for influential people to consider based on experience in other projects and countries. These are certainly not exclusive, nor are they even necessarily required roles. Remember, the goal is exerting general influence, not implementing a specific action plan.

1. Work with the program officers and promoters to understand how family planning, fertility awareness, health services access, and social norms issues are influencing family planning use in their community.
 - a. Gather promoters and other community stakeholders together and discuss how they can best contribute to the family planning and fertility awareness effort. This might be through leadership or opinion-support more than through specific activities.
2. Help convene existing or new platforms for playing the games – although they may not actually facilitate the games themselves.
3. Identify or reach people who are not otherwise being reached by the project and how they might facilitate linkages between new people, promoters, and/or health services.
4. Provide recognition and encouragement for the work of the FCHVs and the promoters, as this can be a significant motivator for community volunteers.
5. Intervene as requested in discussions or tension at the household level as it may come up in relation to shifting reproductive expectations or norms.
6. Advocate with the community, local government, and health services to enhance both quality and utilization of services. Assist with referrals to health services.

Conclusion

Finally, the primary role of influential people is to enhance the acceptance and diffusion of new ideas and behaviors in the communities where they have influence. They themselves will determine how to best do this, including determining the frequency, types of discussions, and activities, or content they may influence. The task of the project is to spark their interest in project activities and content, and to enhance their capacity to support wider diffusion of social norms change.

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