

Pebbles Make the Mountain

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I write this reflection now in the middle of reading through our participant evaluations, which regularly use the words “transformative” and “life-changing.” I am incredibly humbled by and proud of our project and staff when we receive such feedback, and I have long puzzled over why we elicit responses so different from those at conferences.

At the midpoint of New Leaders Week, we share our SEED template with participants to introduce how we design individual SEED sessions, so they will be able to return to their home institutions and create their own SEED seminars, facilitated across time. We then give participants time to ask questions about leading SEED. I love this moment because it represents a critical moment of learning transfer. Participants start to deconstruct the three days of sessions that they have already gone through to understand our facilitative planning and decisions in creating New Leaders Week. They reflect on their institutions, organizations, and communities where they will be leading SEED seminars and consider what it means to do so in their contexts. They begin to sketch out the transformative possibilities of what SEED might look and what SEED might change. It's in this moment that SEED begins to go beyond New Leaders Week.

And, of course, our participants also begin to name what makes them concerned, anxious, or fearful. Are they ready to facilitate? Is their institution ready for SEED? How will they plan their time together? What if their sessions don't go as planned? How much change is actually possible? How much change is enough? This summer during our third New Leaders Week, I faced a familiar set of questions from our newest cohort of SEED leaders. We were running short on time for our session, and I wanted to offer an answer that could begin to do some justice to both the questions and the feelings behind the questions. Taking a moment to focus on this intention, here's what came out: pebbles make the mountain.

SEED practices are intentionally simple. At that same midpoint of New Leaders Week, we ask participants to plan a 25-minute SEED introduction so they can practice using the SEED template and understand what it means to co-design a session with others in mind. The most important advice we give to our participants as they begin this process is to remember our SEED practices. Go around the circle to check-in, share thoughts, and offer appreciation before leaving. Observe our ground rules, including speaking from the “I” and balancing talking and listening. These are all ideas and practices that we believe people can understand from the first time they participate in them, and that they can then facilitate immediately as well. Challenges will still arise, and implementing these practices can help create the space for a group to navigate these situations.

SEED practices become more powerful when repeated. At the University of Washington where I teach, undergraduate students have the chance to participate in SEED as a course with forty students and three facilitators meeting 20 times for two and a half hours each time across the quarter. During our first week, students are hesitant with our

practice of checking in to start each session. By the end of the quarter, students bemoan that they have so few opportunities left to check in with one another. Other faculty have often come to me asking “Does that really work?” because they hear students reference how impactful check in was to establishing a learning community. I often use another metaphor -- that of a bicycle wheel -- to explain why we have iterative practices in SEED. The wheel is always attached to the bike frame and simply rotates around and around and around. There might be moments where a certain perspective or logic dictates that our practices are repetitive to the point of being redundant. It is only when one’s perspective and logic take into account what is beyond the bicycle -- the ground, the surrounding context -- that one understands that the bicycle is moving precisely because the wheels continue rotating in the exact same repetitive motion. In the same way, establishing the routine of checking in and out, of taking time to journal and then share serially, establishes the framework where participants know what to expect in a SEED seminar and by which we are going to move forward.

SEED practices take time. A major distinction between our New Leaders Week and the seminars that our SEED leaders facilitate is with regards to time. New Leaders Week is a one-week residential and intensive training in which we seek to rapidly build a community of learners so that SEED leaders may return home well-equipped. With three sessions a day, by the end of the week, many of our participants ask, “What will it look like when I go back to the real world?” The SEED seminar is our answer. Even though SEED seminars are generally for fewer hours than New Leaders Week (25 hours minimum), they are spread out across more time (generally a year and at a minimum 10 weeks). Whereas the intense brevity of New Leaders Week -- how much we do in just under a week -- is part of its impact, it is the time between local SEED seminar sessions during the year that allows SEED seminar participants to more deeply reflect on what they experience in the seminar and use that to make changes in their institutions and communities. SEED seminar participants have the opportunity to check in with these changes at each session. They can collaborate more deeply because they are from the same institution. Their work together can continue across years -- and as longtime SEED staff member Pat Badger shared this summer -- even across decades.

Perhaps this is why SEED can seem so ordinary upon first glance. Many people have participated in workshops or conversations similar to a single SEED session. Many experienced facilitators have led sessions like ours. We welcome this as part of being the change we wish to see. As we move past our first session at New Leaders Week into our second session, and then our second day, and then the next day and the next, we soon hear even the most experienced facilitators acknowledging their surprise at the depth of their own work within themselves. I smile as I consider that our questions on Day 7 differ little from our questions on Day 1, and appreciate that when SEED leaders return home to lead their own seminars, their questions to their colleagues in September may differ little from their questions in May. Our secret is no secret at all: for justice to be justice, we must return to it again and again as not just a word to be said but a value to be reflected upon and enacted for each of us in our own ways. Pebbles make the mountain.