The Dwight Hall Method
A rigorous approach to social change

Many people reach a point in their lives when they realize that society isn't fair, our human systems aren't adequate to meet human needs, and in many cases, a variety of injustices—poverty, violent crime, racism, etc.—conspire to suppress and prevent the flourishing of individuals, communities, and whole segments of our population. Many people recognize that and want to do something about it but don't know where to begin. Others may bravely wade in to the issues and get overwhelmed or disillusioned by their inability to see or bring about meaningful change. Others use rigorous analysis to understand what is really going on, learn from their mistakes and from other people who have different skills and experiences, and decide that collaboration is a key to bringing about successful change. The Dwight Hall Method is designed as a guide to help anyone approach a social problem in a deliberate way that encourages thoughtfulness and repeated readjustment and improvement based on results and deepening insight.

The Method

The Method is essentially an application of reasoning to a social problem, and in that sense will seem rather obvious. It is a form of the scientific method but applied toward solutions rather than the assembling of greater knowledge. The steps in the Method are:

- Identify a problem
- Do analysis
- Define the need
- Propose a theory of cause
- Propose a hypothesis for change
- Design an intervention
- Identify necessary resources
- Implement the intervention
- Measure results
- Evaluate results
- Refine and demonstrate

Identifying a Problem

While this may seem the easiest step in the Method it requires a certain ability to see things as they really are and a commitment to improving our communities and our world. Identifying a problem is easiest when it is affecting us directly in a negative way. This is fine because solving a problem that is affecting you probably benefits other people who are being affected as well. What is harder is not being inured to the problems that aren't affecting us directly but are affecting others, especially the most vulnerable or unjustly treated members of society. When identifying the problem be specific about what problem you are addressing and why it is a problem.

Analysis

Once you have identified the problem you need to understand it as thoroughly as you can. What's really going on here? Is what I am seeing on the surface really what is going on underneath. Are there other dynamics in play that I am not seeing? You need to learn as much about the history of and factors in the circumstances in which the problem is occurring. You need to find accurate information about the problem, whether data or direct information from people who are experiencing the problem or are directly involved in the circumstances. You need to study and learn and become informed before you launch out on any major projects.

Define the Need

With a deeper grasp of the complexities of the problem and various factors and actors involved, you are ready to define the need for change. This involves taking what is not working or what is unjust and flipping it from the negative to a positive. For example:

> *people are going hungry because they cannot afford to pay for meals*
> becomes
> *people need access to cooked meals so they don't have to go hungry*

Theory of Cause

It is very important at this point that you stop and theorize about why the problem exists before you propose a solution. While it is quite obvious to propose that people shouldn't go hungry and that people should therefore have access to meals, before you go ahead and design a system to provide meals to people, you should ask yourself why are people unable to feed themselves? What is causing this need and are there underlying causes or multiple causes or do the causes vary depending on the individual circumstances or category of persons? To use the common analogy of the waterfall, why are there so many bodies coming down the waterfall and what is the upstream solution to prevent this? Do your best to propose a theory that explains why the problem is occurring but be prepared for that theory to change as more information is available to you.

Hypothesis for Change

Understanding the cause as best as you can, you are now ready to hypothesize about how you can change this circumstance to alleviate or eliminate the problem. For example, you might have observed while tutoring in a local school that not all children are adequately fed and that those children who aren't getting enough nourishment are negatively affected, resulting in behavioral or performance problems. This is the problem. Your analysis suggests that the root cause is that these children aren't being fed enough before they arrive at school (for a variety of reasons mostly related to poverty) which results in their poor academic performance or behavior. Your hypothesis is that if they were provided with nutritious meals or snacks, they would perform and behave better and be more successful students.

Designing the Intervention

Now is the time to propose how to address the problem (finally!). But before you go any further, you have to ask an important question:

what other efforts are already going on and is your solution detracting from those, duplicating them unnecessarily or reinventing something that has already been addressed?

If so, you should find ways to collaborate with and reinforce good efforts already underway. If not, then you can proceed, mindful that there likely are partners out there who will be great allies and aids in your achieving success.

Taking the above example, how do you plan to get nutritious meals or snacks to students in the school? Should they be provided at the beginning of the day? Will they be provided to every child who wants them? How will the meals or snacks be served? By whom? Who will order, store, and clean up the inventory? What will all of this cost? Who will implement it? How will you sustain it over time? To answer these questions, you will need to enter another round of analysis to design an effective project.

Identify Resources

You will see straightaway that in order to implement your proposed intervention, you will need lots of resources: material, financial, human, etc. Where will you get these? What is already available that you can tap into? In most cases, at this point you will need to draw up a budget. This will basically show that if you have these items (personnel, materials, transportation, fees, etc., etc.), which cost the following amounts, you will be able to affect the following number of people in this way.

Implementation

This is the hardest part of your work and the point at which many worthy ideas fall through. This may be because some of your reasoning, assumptions, or understandings of the problem were faulty. In that case, return to the earlier stages of the method and reexamine your work. You may find solutions here to why you are having problems successfully implementing your plan. It may be, however, that your plan is brilliant in theory but is hard to implement in reality because of human factors. In most cases, nothing good will come about without a tremendous amount of effort invested in building strong, trusting relationships with the people you are working with, whether those you are attempting to serve or those on whom you are dependent to succeed. Suppressing ego, being warm and caring, smiling a lot, and listening more than you speak, are all important tools in building trusting and resilient relationships.

Measuring and Evaluating Results

While some impacts are very hard to measure because the data is too hard to collect or the impact is ineffable, you need to be thinking about how you will gather the results of your intervention before you begin. Do you need a baseline measurement so you can measure impact over time? Then you need to have that ready to go before you begin your intervention. Do you know exactly what to measure? Remember that your impact is directly tied to your hypothesis and is needed to demonstrate that your hypothesis is correct or that it needs to be reformed in light of the results. Measurement and evaluation will happen continuously throughout the project to make sure it is continuing to succeed and remain effective.

Refine and Demonstrate

Continuous evaluation of the results of your intervention is what makes a good idea sustainable and constantly improving. It is also essential to demonstrate to others that the idea works. Rather than saying that your solution is a good one, you can prove it by showing data (whether quantitative or qualitative) that makes your case. This is very important when gathering resources to continue or to expand your program (such as when writing grants or raising donations) or to persuade other people in other places to adopt your solution and bring about greater lasting change.