

DIALOGUE IN THE DARK

MOVING BEYOND SIGHT

THE IDEA

The social exclusion of disabled people and the unequal chances in getting the same opportunities for education, career, transportation, and leisure facilities are a major challenge around the world. Also crucial are the increasing levels of distrust and communication breakdowns at every level, leading to prejudices and breakdown of societal and business machinery. 610 million people worldwide are registered as disabled - the millions unregistered not even mentioned. 2/3 of them are living in developing countries. The interaction between »abled« and »disabled« people is often hindered by stereotypes, fears, avoidance and prejudices. The levels of understanding, support and access to education, information, jobs, etc. vary from country to country. Even in developed countries like Germany, only about 15% have a job. The prevailing opinion that disability is »less worthy than normal« leads to discrimination and marginalization of the blind and disabled worldwide. The interaction with blind and other marginalized people is still dominated by pity and welfare, and is focused mainly on the deficits of being disabled. There is a lack of understanding in the potential that might arise out of a handicap as well as the fact that disabled »suffer« much more from the ignorance, information deficit, unequal rights and uncertainty of the »abled« than from the disability itself.

Andreas Heinecke took the idea that experiencing extraordinary and powerful emotions that are mentally challenging, not just have a long lasting effect on people, but also improve the quality their human interactions. The idea gave rise to the concept of Dialogue in the Dark, the underlying paradigm for which come from the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's work »The Principles of Dialogue« which states: »The only way to learn is through encounter«.

»Dialogue in the Dark« takes as its starting point the ideas and non-visual perceptions of blind people, in order to discover the unseen within and all around us. »Dialogue in the Dark« certainly is not an ordinary exhibition or a business workshop. Rather, it is a platform for communication and a close exchange between different cultures, provoking a change in perspectives.

THE CONCEPT

EXHIBITION

In »Dialogue in the Dark« exhibition visitors are led by blind guides in small groups through a specially constructed and totally darkened exhibition – where sounds, wind, temperatures and textures convey the characteristics of daily environments such as a park, a city or a cafe. In the dark, daily routines become a new experience. A reversal of roles is created: sighted people are torn out of their familiar environments, losing the sense they rely on most - their sight. Blind people guide them, provide them with security and a sense of orientation - transmitting a world without pictures. The blind and partially sighted guides open the visitors' eyes in the dark to show them that their world is not poorer – just different.

BUSINESS WORKSHOP

In the »Dialogue in the Dark« Business Workshop, participants rely on visually impaired instructors to guide them in complete darkness for two hours. The participants learn to dare, share and care, and will work out strategies to solve common tasks together. Communication and cooperation are the essential tools for success.

Participants are then escorted out of the darkness for an hour of reflection and debriefing on the transition from disempowerment to empowerment. They learn to use hidden senses more effectively and come to think twice about abilities and disabilities.

THE IMPACT

By entering worlds without sight or sound, we learn new abilities from those whom we perceive to be disabled. As we shift into an ever more globalized community, a visit into a world we thought was limiting actually helps us to break free of our own limitations.

This encounter brings us new virtues, values, skills, gratitude, humility and appreciation for those different from us. It fosters greater effectiveness in the business context and increased awareness of human diversity.

EXHIBITION

The »Dialogue in the Dark« exhibition has been presented in more than 30 countries and over 160 sites throughout Europe, Asia and America since its beginning in 1988. So far, 6 Million visitors have experienced »Dialogue in the Dark« worldwide, and 6,000 blind employees found a job and empowerment through »Dialogue in the Dark«.

»Dialogue in the Dark« succeeded in reaching the broad public, gained great attention by international media and created many new jobs for different groups of disadvantaged people.

Through the exchange of roles – the blind guide can »see« in the dark, the visitors are »blind« – and the emotional impact is stronger.

- > the visitors gain an experience that leads to reflection,
- > social borders get reduced,
- > ignorance gets changed into openness and interest and
- > pity turns into respect.

By offering the broad public a personal experience they will never forget, »Dialogue in the Dark« changes the mindset of the public regarding disability and diversity and increases their tolerance towards »otherness«.

»Dialogue in the Dark« is an incubator that aims for social integration of blind and other marginalized people by offering them:

- > a platform to present their skills, potentials and personality,
- > a chance to gain more self-confidence through a challenging job and
- > independence through a self-earned salary.

Thousands of guest-book comments reflect the impression the exhibition has on its visitors - they are moved by their experience and are positively impressed by the guides. Survey results, asking visitors about their experience, show that 96% of the visitors to the »Dialogue in the Dark« exhibition think it is »of great importance to the society«¹, 80% of the visitors to the exhibition stated they believed that a visit to the exhibition assists in improving attitudes towards the handicapped population in general and not only towards the blind population, 98% of the visitors stated they would warmly recommend to friends to visit the exhibition.

BUSINESS WORKSHOP

In the »Dialogue in the Dark« business workshops, the sightless environment forces the participants to deal with the sudden withdrawal of a key sense: vision. As they rediscover their other senses, they also awaken them to new aspects of personal power and perception. Listening and talking become vital, because in this environment those who don't communicate cease to exist.

So far there have been over 300 workshops in more than 10 countries with over 4,500 participants. Through their three stages of immediate impact – ranging from giving an impulse to reflect, prompting a mechanism to cope to providing an inspiration to change – »Dialogue in the Dark« business workshops leave a lasting impression for heightened awareness.

Participants are triggered to reflect on themselves and on their relation to their social environment which forms the basis for strengthened intra- and interpersonal intelligence. On the one hand, this is realized by nurturing self-awareness and heightening sensibility to own emotions and effective measures to deal with them. On the other hand, »Dialogue in the Dark« business workshops prompt participants to turn towards their social environment to cope with the situation and to develop an open mindset as well as trust and empathy with others.

A survey based on the analysis of more than 300 questionnaires and a sample of 20 interviews shows that participants are ...

- > ... inspired to enhance their way of interacting with others and to pursue a more cooperative and collaborative approach (43 percent).
- > ... sensibilized in terms of self-awareness and strengthened in their self-confidence to face unknown environments (30 percent).

¹ Study was conducted by the Midgam Institute and ordered by the Service for the Blind at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Service in Israel in 2008. It is based on a representative sample of 502 respondents in the adult (18 years and over) Jewish, Hebrew speaking population and on 200 respondents that visited Dialogue in the Dark.

- > ... encouraged to develop trust and empathy and to become more open-minded towards their social environment (28 percent).

Three out of four participants reported to have translated lessons learned into an increased self-awareness, a consciousness for matters of communication, and more openness towards others. Many felt to have anchored the lessons in their sub consciousness or integrated them in their overall behavior.

One participant put the »Dialogue in the Dark« business workshops experience to the point:

»You learn a lot in a short time in an impactful way in an unusual environment.«
(Participant from Kanchi Business Workshop Series, Ireland 2009)

THE TESTIMONIALS

These exhibitions and workshops have received tremendous feedback wherever they have been organized. Some of the notable events where the Dialogue workshops have provided a unique learning experience include the summits organized by the World Economic Forum, including their annual meeting at Davos.

EXHIBITION VISITORS

- > »An impressive experience which moves seeing into a different dimension.«
- > »This exhibition is more important for a mutual understanding than one can guess beforehand.«
- > »Thank you for the impressions which have shown me a lot, and what difficulties there are if you can't see.«
- > »The exhibition is an excellent contribution when it comes to dealing with disability. I got a lot out of it. A successful change of perspective.«
- > »This was an experience where everybody could get to know something new – one can't be too enthusiastic!«
- > »This experience was really indescribable and incredible.«
- > »Best of all, I'd like to go through it again!«

BUSINESS WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

- > »Managerial staff without a personal identity often fail to get across fundamental concepts for decisions. A few hours in darkness helps sharpen the identity of any manager.« (Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, 2007)

- > »The learning effect is achieved by really listening to each other and by thinking together in a challenging environment. Both of these things found direct application at work.« (Herald Sun, Australia, 2007)
- > »The half-day training session for our European Junior Managers met even our highest expectations. Afterwards, the impressions and the exercises in the dark were discussed, giving our colleagues a chance to analyse their leadership skills from a completely new perspective. The feedback of all 16 participants was very positive, and for the future we have decided to offer this training to our own colleagues.« (Heino Ploeger, Manager Personnel Development—Olympus Europa GmbH)
- > »This was really a very special experience, not just for our group, but as a feedback from other colleagues.« (After workshop at Allianz Global Investors in Munich, 2009)

DIALOGUE GUIDES

- > »Dialogue in the Dark trained me the skills needed to act. Best face forward. Show goes on.«
- > »At the beginning we talked about 'Dialogue's fever'. Because it is like a rise of adrenalin, the rise of self-esteem, the rise of self confidence and that changes entirely your vision of life.«
- > »Dialogue in the Dark made me feel I'm somebody in spite of the handicap.«
- > »For the first time I was paid for something that was useful, not just answering the phone. Paid to give something to others, give emotions, experience.«

THE FOUNDER

Andreas Heinecke, PhD, Founder of »Dialogue in the Dark«, an awareness-raising social franchising company, offering exhibitions and business workshops in total darkness, creating jobs for visually impaired, disabled and disadvantaged worldwide. He won various awards, became Ashoka's first fellow in Western Europe in 2005, Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Schwab Foundation in 2007 and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Social Entrepreneurship in 2008. He is the CEO of Dialogue Social Enterprise (www.dialogue-se.com) and as a Social Entrepreneur, Andreas Heinecke is committed to fulfil his mission by creating his own profit and reinvesting it into the idea of »Dialogue in the Dark«.

To understand the methodology and evaluation of this concept, and for more details on »Dialogue in the Dark« exhibitions and business workshops, please visit www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com

You may also be interested to visit www.dialogue-in-silence.com to learn about »Dialogue in Silence« exhibitions and business workshops