

The Impact Hub Amsterdam: Sensing to establish a social community

Introduction

An inspiring place for initiatives for a better world, Amsterdam's Impact Hub is where creative people work for positive change in a setting that encourages collaboration with environmentally friendly decor and organic meals. What are its origins? How was this part of a worldwide network established? What role did Theory U play in it? We spoke to a few people who were there at the beginning.

Frederike Vos is an entrepreneur and facilitator of change. She guides and encourages collaboration between companies, groups and communities who are stuck in their way of working and living. Vos believes in the power of good relationships and a human-friendly environment to make the world a better place. She is a co-founder of the Impact Hub, a space for social innovation where social entrepreneurs can work in a community. As a born facilitator, she combines intuition and pragmatism, and knows how to ask the right questions to move past a deadlock or dead-end and move things in a new direction. She now lives in France.

Marieke van der Velden, at the time, had joined as a Hub community host and project manager in the fields of sustainability, social development and culture. She then became involved in its development and was responsible for collaborations and engagement. Van der Velden is a staunch believer in infinite possibilities, co-creation and empowerment. She is not afraid of the unknown and is always on the lookout for new information, missing pieces of puzzle and opportunities for innovation.

Both of them rely on elements from Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations (www.artofhosting.org), Spiral Dynamics Integral, Deep Democracy and holacracy. They believe these philosophies have to be lived and put them on par with each other – thinking and doing are on the same level, which feels authentic to them.

What is Impact Hub Amsterdam?

The first hub opened in London in 2005 and sprung from the idea that the world probably lacks many things but that there is no shortage of people with good ideas. It has since grown into a global community of entrepreneurs, venues, knowledge sources and resources. Impact Hub's members want to build a better world through instigating positive change, implementing ideas that will make a difference and establishing partnerships. Impact Hub is an inspiring concept for bringing together people who *want* to make a difference and providing a place where they can work, meet, learn and communicate together. It is a place where knowledge, contacts, experience, investors and inspiration come together. Meaningful conversations, impromptu introductions, meetings and workshops, online contacts, group lunches, brainstorming and co-creating sessions all add to its magic. Peer-to-peer supply and demand meet daily, whether it's through expertise, investment, coaching, brainstorming or constructive criticism. There are 86 hubs on five continents in countries ranging from India and England to Brazil and South Africa. (www.amsterdam.impacthub.net)

The U-process and The Impact Hub Amsterdam

Seeing

At The Hub there is a feeling of empathetic contact in the air. It feels as if everyone is trying their best to connect with one another with an open mind and open heart. The decor was designed to enhance this. The desks, for example, were shaped like the figure eight to bring people closer together (see Figure 14). Any member of The Hub is welcome to organise lunch and raise a problem he is struggling with and ask everyone at the table for their input. This way of working allows everyone to use everyone else's talents.

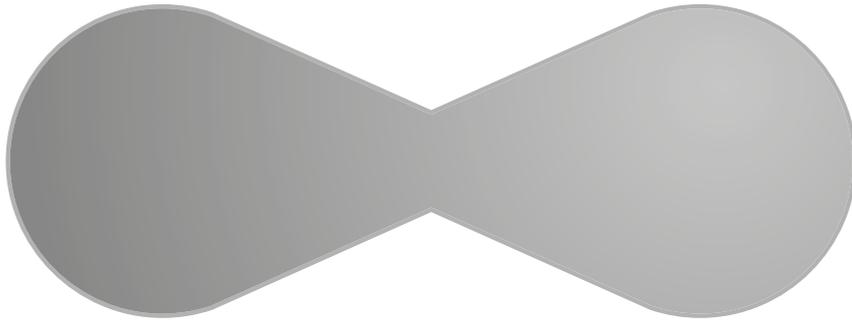


Figure 14: *The desks were designed to encourage contact*

Sensing and presencing

From the beginning, the founders as well as the community hosts, who are the soul of The Impact Hub, worked with sensing and presencing because they wanted to be sure they created the community they had in mind. This way of building a community together requires dialogue and the community hosts therefore did it on a daily basis. Hosting is essential for The Hub: It is both a science and an art. A good host will create an inspiring and positive workplace, connect people and opportunities, bring together people who can create synergy, support, facilitate, coach, co-create and put his head together with entrepreneurs'.

They do this particularly when someone has a problem or need, which always makes it necessary to enter dialogue with everyone involved. It requires a high degree of ownership from all those actively involved in The Hub. It also asks the willingness to do what is required and discuss and bring into the open what is needed as well as to explore in greater depth together and feel in a presencing state. What are the seeds that are on the verge of sprouting? What do we notice about them? How can we convert them into action in the now so that our actions will help them bud and grow?

When Van der Velden talks about her decision to move from Groningen in the north of the Netherlands to Amsterdam to better assist with the establishment of The Impact Hub, it sounds as if she had a moment of letting go and "acted in an instant", as Scharmer calls acting from a deeper source without knowing what the consequences would be and being accepting of that. It is what is meant by "you have to do what you have to do".

Crystallizing

When creating a global hub, there is a lot to consider. Where to start, for one. In The Impact Hub's makers' experience, it needs a physical space to meet to be able to meet its goals. This has a bearing on its mission to contribute to making a better world and desire to connect people who also want to contribute to it. Such a place, where everyone can come together, can serve as the basis for working together. The question is then how to go about it if you want to work independently and therefore without being subsidised. At The Impact Hub, the founders consciously used the system. For instance, to get their idea off the ground, they had at one point asked a group of potential members to sign a declaration of intent stating they are joining The Impact Hub. In this way, they got the money they needed. It instantly highlighted another basic need too: Financial sustainability is an important requirement for working on sustainability. The Impact Hub therefore is a business. Doing business and earning money are key. The thinking is that doing business keeps people and communities healthy.

In the case of The Impact Hub, the most significant moment of crystallizing was when they had found a space; the moment there is a concrete property. Towards the end of 2008 they had found a building from where the ideas of initiators, Tatiana Glad (The Impact Hub Amsterdam) and Moraan Gilad (The Impact Hub Rotterdam), could be brought to fruition. At the time, the layout was not yet clear. For Vos it signified the moment she committed to The Impact Hub: "A property is tangible. It helps you take the step from talking to doing." To further shape Glad and Gilad's ideas, they had asked a group of architects and designers to start working on the layout and design the minute the premises became available. Their point of departure was to ask, "If this is what the premises will be used for, what, in your opinion, does it mean for the layout and decor?" They asked potential users of the space the same question but phrased it differently. They were asked where they'd like to drink coffee, where the light should come from, where the chairs have to be, where they'd like to work and most importantly, how they'd like to work and what is important to them. It allowed The Impact Hub's layout and decor to come about organically without losing sight of the key question: What does its users like and what would work best in view of our goal? Step by step the elements (tables, coaching rooms, podium, bar, kitchen area, lockers and shelves, meeting areas) were designed, built and put in their places.

Building a community

Building a community in the first instance is about establishing relationships. Based on that, the deal will eventually be sealed. It always happens in this order. Never the other way around.

At The Impact Hub, the initiators wanted to build a community and invited people to join by asking them these questions: What do you want to contribute? What do you want to achieve? How can we contribute to this? They always went out from the belief that people would want to give when you are prepared to share your talent. It helps to build a community like The Impact Hub if it has something concrete to show: premises, tables, chairs, workspace. That provides in the basic need for a place to meet and serves as "anchor". The Impact Hub also provided a menu of sorts with something for everyone. For one, it is a flexible workspace, for another a meeting space for social entrepreneurs while someone else may value its global networking opportunities. Anything is possible.

Prototyping

From the beginning, Glad and Gilad applied the principle of prototypes that entails introducing something to the world in an early stage, getting feedback and maturing the newborn idea. They began with the wish to create a community in which like-minded people can meet one another and had begun building it long before they found their first premises without having a clear idea of what awaited them. Making a start despite this, enabled the community to grow in a way that resembles small S-shaped movements that intersect and hook onto one another while chaos lies in between.

For Glad and Gilad, chaos is a sign that something new is about to emerge. It is also an indication that it is time to go to a state of presencing to observe the seeds of the idea that is about to sprout. Chaos therefore also demands trust but this time it's the trust that it will pass. Think of the seasons where one follows on the other. There is no use in resisting the arrival of winter. In the same way it is no use resisting the arrival of chaos in organisational development. It is part of it. To be able to handle the chaos, the people in the hub had to trust and deal with the voices of fear and cynicism.

Because of the steps taken during the development of The Impact Hub, a community with over three hundred members now exists. For Glad and Gilad, The Impact Hub is confirmation of the idea that there is another way – a way of living where everyone is inspired by everyone and working in a community.

Some advice

For companies that are considering working with Theory U, we have the following advice: Take your own company as your point of departure, observe closely what the future needs of the participants are in a state of presencing and gather people around you who have the same goals and let them share their thoughts and ideas and provide support (co-creation).

Where is The Impact Hub now?

Initially Glad and Gilad had believed that once they had moved through the U, the process would be complete. Now they know, partially thanks to being so closely involved in the establishment of The Impact Hub, that it is never finished. They've realised that it is about continually creating the right conditions so that something new can emerge again and again.

Conclusion

The lessons we learnt from the work that was done with Theory U during the establishment of The Impact Hub Amsterdam are as follows:

- Organisational development with Theory U requires a great willingness to be transparent when it comes to discussing what is needed.
- Working through the U can be seen as a way of life and just like life, there are periods of great activity interspersed with periods of reflection.
- Working with Theory U asks a large degree of ownership, for example, in the form of talking about problems or desires.
- This ownership results in a self-cleansing system where the members call one another into account.

- Working towards a vision energises people, for instance, to continuously initiate a conversation if its necessary.
- Being surrounded by likeminded people is encouraging and makes it possible to see it through.
- The main objective is to build a community of people who want to build a better world.
- Presencing is important for feeling which seed is on the verge of sprouting and ready to be developed.
- Many decisions are taken intuitively when working with Theory U by consciously involving the unconscious.
- Applying Theory U basically requires a trusting, giving attitude.
- Organisational development through Theory U requires an attitude that will allow participants to handle chaos in the here and now.

Techniques used

- Building a group of people who communicate to connect
- Observing differently
- Meditation
- Dialogue