

Positive Impact Consulting Findings for De Meevaart

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Introduction

The philosophy of De Meevaart is self-management and connection. It is an experiment in which the neighbors design and implement the activities offered because they are most aware of the neighborhood's wants and needs. De Meevaart's system "bubbles up" initiatives from the community rather than offering programs established by another entity. Working with De Meevaart, the residents are co-creators of their initiatives and their social reality.

De Meevaart fulfills its role as being the "living room" of Indische Buurt by offering a home for the community and providing various activities, a good use of space, and a resident gathering area to connect community members together.

The elderly are vulnerable members of the community that are not engaging in the process of self-management and self-organization embodied by De Meevaart, or fully utilizing the services or facilities of the organization. De Meevaart would like to increase the engagement of the elderly, both with De Meevaart and the broader Indische Buurt community, and has retained Positive Impact Consulting to investigate how to accomplish this goal.

Data Collection and Analysis

Positive Impact Consulting collected qualitative data through interviews and focus groups. Data was collected Monday, 13/11/17 and Wednesday, 15/11/17.

Participant(s) Title	Affiliation	Collection Method
4 Social Workers	Civic Amsterdam	Interview
1 Flex Worker	Civic Amsterdam	Interview
1 Volunteer	Civic Amsterdam	Interview
20 Elderly Residents	Private Residents & Assisted Living Residents	Focus Groups
3 Employees	De Meevaart	Interviews
2 Volunteers	De Meevaart	Interviews
1 Police Officer	Indische Buurt	Interview
1 Housing Coordinator	Eigen Haard	Interview

Additionally, observational data was collected during an Indische Buurt community tour, several meals at local restaurants and at an annual community festival.

Positive Impact Consulting used the “in vivo” methodology (assigning a label to a section of data using a word or short phrase taken from the section of data) to code the data and synthesize it for easy understanding. The data were then used to determine four identified themes and stimulate additional questions.

Themes

Impact of De Meevaart’s Origins

One of our data points is that De Meevaart’s existing organizational culture of encouraging initiatives and programs to “bubble up” from the local community may present challenges to working with the elderly. According to Firoez Azarhoosh, one of De Meevaart’s founders, De Meevaart has been driven by individuals who are committed to building community through networks of active involvement. As one De Meevaart representative commented, “We don’t create programs and then go out and search for participants, because they never come. Instead, we let the residents come up with what they want to do.” As a result, the organization has been effective in allowing the community to define its needs and responding with generous support.

Although De Meevaart has worked effectively with isolated communities employing this method, the elderly community may present special challenges, given their health issues, lack of familiarity with and involvement in the organization, special transportation needs and, in some cases, challenges with language. One of the social workers said the following:

“When I first came here, I went door to door to meet the elderly residents. It was not easy and took a lot of patience. It was very hard to get them to come out to any of our activities. However, eventually we would get one to come and the next time they would bring one or two others when they came”.

Based on our investigation, it is unlikely that members of the elderly community will create or propose any initiatives independently. We specifically asked social workers and senior interviewees if they were aware of initiatives that had been begun by elderly community members. Although we received feedback about individuals who had initiated some activities, such as holding a weekly dinner, our investigation did not identify older community members (65+) who had begun large initiatives or programs. Although it is not part of De Meevaart’s traditional methodology, implementing a senior

initiative may require a different approach, rather than expecting it to “bubble up” from the elderly community.

Finally, if De Meevaart initiates a senior program, the question becomes will it go to the elderly or do the elderly need to come to De Meevaart? We hope you will think creatively about this question. We found that success often happens when you go to the elderly. In our interviews with the Flevopoort seniors, we found few had ever been to De Meevaart and most were unaware of the programs offered. However, some seniors highlighted their willingness to travel for the right programs, especially if they had friends also attending. We learned that the elderly participating in the Flevopoort programs travel by walking or taking a free bus. De Meevaart is not currently well positioned to offer services to the elderly in Flevopoort and other areas of the city not accessible by walking; however, with additional resources, a connection with elderly community members may be possible.

Increased Reliance on the Vibrant and Robust Indische Buurt Social Networks

The social networks in the Indische Buurt neighborhood are robust and diverse. To increase engagement of the elderly, these networks should be utilized to their fullest potential. Based on De Meevaart’s brochure, there are at least 150 organizations that collaborate with and use De Meevaart facilities regularly. During the investigation, we spoke with representatives of three organizations/groups that serve the elderly. We also spoke with representatives of other organizations (the local police department and Eigen Haard) that assist the elderly community, although that is not their primary objective. The institutions and individuals are closely connected to each other and have created a safety net to protect vulnerable members of the community. Comments from these respondents included the following:

“The police are the eyes and ears of the local community”.

“We think that the _____organization does a very good job with citizens in their area. If we believe there is a problem with an elderly person that lives near the _____ organization, we call over and they will go and check on the person.”

“People will come and tell me that they have not seen their neighbor for a while. First, I tell them to go and knock on their door. Often, they won’t do it, so I will go and check myself”.

While these groups are focused on the safety and well-being of vulnerable citizens, it seems possible to involve more organizations in efforts focused solely on the elderly. De Meevaart interfaces and collaborates with many organizations, groups and individuals with the potential to reach the elderly;

however, this is not the organization's primary focus. To date, these groups have not been fully tapped to identify and reach out to elderly people. If De Meevaart chooses to begin an initiative focused on connecting elderly community members, its most valuable resources will be its existing collaborators and groups, a powerful network that can be further activated and coordinated in the overall interest of the elderly community, especially those who are elderly.

In addition, respondents suggested that existing activities could be built upon to further engage the elderly. The suggestions included the Super Sint Maarten activities, the Indische Buurt festival and the Christmas Market. Although these individuals stated some elderly community members already participated, they proposed increasing efforts to involve this group in future programs in order to integrate them into the Indische Buurt community.

Learning to Engage the Elderly in Indische Buurt

Through our investigation, we learned about a variety of opportunities to engage the elderly population in Indische Buurt. Some of the information from our interviews highlighted successful approaches that have been used in the past. Groups that currently work with the elderly spoke about offering free food and drinks at their meetings or having activities that the elderly enjoyed, such as games or arts and crafts activities. Others emphasized the opportunity to get together with friends in the setting and connecting. We also heard about the importance of having ambassadors, care coaches, elderly coaches or community leaders that reach the elderly through their existing networks.

Some of the most exciting pieces of information that emerged from our research emphasized the possibility to learn from previous successful initiatives at De Meevaart and existing elderly volunteers in the Indische Buurt community. Quarda El Morabet's work has brought in many women who were in isolation out into the community. These women have gained the courage to try something new by hearing stories from their peers and learning that they have qualities that others can benefit from. As a result, they have become producers in their community and entered a new and rewarding chapter of their life. Through their cooking experiences, they have gained pride in their work and a new sense of self-esteem. As Quarda said, "The goal is to get women out of the house doing what they already know how to do that is meaningful to others". We think it is no accident that we were given the opportunity to learn about Quarda's initiative and believe that there are tangible lessons that can be applied to the elderly that are in isolation.

We also spoke with a dedicated elderly volunteer that is living in a beautiful apartment in the Flevopoort. This woman created and runs a social program that feeds over 20 elderly community members once a week. Part of her drive to engage with her community through fellowship and food in this way came from her previous experience in the restaurant industry. We have seen other examples where the elderly have demonstrated the desire to share their skills with the Indische Buurt community. A recent initiative highlighted by several respondents involved elderly volunteers working to clean up the green space courtyards in their apartment complex. One of the reasons this initiative was so successful was because participants could see the result of the work in their community, thus providing them purpose and confidence. Future efforts to engage the elderly population in Indische Buurt could focus on cultivating purpose and pride. Taking this approach will take more effort but is likely to result in a larger and longer lasting involvement.

“You’re talking but not about the issue of the elderly”

De Meevaart’s extensive connections and networks are readily used and maintained through on-going connections, collaborations, and shared initiatives. Through the data, we heard that Civic Amsterdam uses De Meevaart when needed to help support an individual in their area, young or old. There was an emphasis of communication between the different social and community agencies. Additional data indicated that there was a community awareness of De Meevaart and perhaps some confusion as to the design of their offerings and whether or not it would benefit the elderly community. One thought from an interviewee was to have a host at De Meevaart to introduce newcomers to the offerings and make sure that they are comfortable at the facility. Another spoke of going where the people are, including super markets and stores. With all of these conversations and connection between the multiple stakeholders and change agents, the question arose as to whether there has been a comprehensive conversation around the elder specifically and the loneliness epidemic engaging all stakeholders.

Lack of Integration in the Elderly Community

There seems to be minimal interaction between elderly Dutch community members and those of the immigrant community. Based on our research, there is not a coordinating council of organizations that serve the elderly in the Indische Buurt community. Creating such a council might be effective in starting the process of bringing these groups of elderly people together. In our limited observations at the Flevopoort facility, there were some cases of the groups mixing together but also examples of different ethnic groups sitting separately. While this may be due to language or cultural difficulties, we wondered

if this was an area that required additional study and focus. In particular, our conversations with one respondent suggested that discrimination against members of the Moroccan and other Middle Eastern groups is still pervasive in some segments of the senior Dutch community. She told the following story about a little Moroccan girl who came to the door on Sint Maarten's Day in the senior facility where she lived. When the respondent opened her door, the little girl started to cry. When asked why, the little girl showed her the basket, which was empty. The little girl said that the residents of the building would not open the door to give her candy. Our respondent said that, regardless of how you feel about the Moroccans, she was a child and you should put your feelings aside.

Please Considers/Recommendations

- Create opportunity for members of the elderly community in Indische Buurt to become producers and offer their skills. When this is accomplished, success stories can they be shared to help increase future engagement and inspire others to be courageous
- Create a council of agencies that support the elderly community and promote collaboration between various groups and agencies. This council could coordinate different activities and programs of the different organizations and could more effectively pull together those organizations focused on elderly clients.
- Consider creating a structured management system of the all organizations and initiatives impacting the elderly to minimize duplicative efforts.
- Consider organizing a large system intervention to engage all stakeholders in a discussion about the elderly (See attached stakeholder map). The goal of such an intervention is to bring all the stakeholders into the room and jointly develop a plan for the future and new ways to work together.

Conclusion

Firoez Azarhoosh once said, "There is a difference between what we are thinking and what we are doing and we have not created enough room to get into discussion with ourselves." We believe it is very important for the Indische Buurt community and De Meevaart to create room to have a discussion with themselves about the elderly, with all concerned parties. De Meevaart was built by thriving entrepreneurs who explored what was possible and succeeded at co-creating a self-managed, sustainable center and was successful. What would it look like to co-create a world of possibilities for the underserved elderly population by leveraging the successes of the past? What would it look like to engage all stakeholders that impact the elderly in the community, including the elderly, in a different conversation? How would it look to value all seniors and create opportunities for them to act as

producers and not just consumers? What are the next steps for De Meevaart and the Indische Buurt community?