Designing Changemaker Education for Greater Life Satisfaction

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Abstract

The Amani Institute's Social Innovation Management (SIM) post-graduate certificate has helped changemakers build skills and gain tools to address social challenges and create a positive impact. Burn-out and loneliness, however, can be barriers for changemakers to do so. Hence, one of the most important impact and success indicators to ensure that the changemakers participating in the program can do this work while maintaining well-being is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Through intentionally designing the program to promote life satisfaction, the SIM Changemakers have consistently shown statistically significant improvement in SWLS scores at the end of the program indicating improved life satisfaction and well-being.

Background and Context

Many changemakers – people who take action to solve systemic social and environmental issues – struggle with being overworked, burnt out, and feeling as if they are never doing enough to solve the world's most pressing social and environmental problems such as climate change, inequality, and social justice concerns (Habib 2021). Additionally, social impact work can feel lonely (Bortnowska and Seiler 2021): changemakers may feel like they are one of the few people attempting to create positive impact, and people around them might not understand what they do and why they do it. These concerns, as well as the problems they are attempting to solve, may have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it even more difficult for changemakers, in the impact sector or otherwise, to do their work effectively (Peinado and Anderson 2020; Joshi and Sharma 2020).

At Amani Institute, we understand this and design programs to combat these concerns. Amani Institute, a US-registered 501(c)3 organization, has been operating for ten years, with offices in Brazil, Kenya, and India. Our mission is to develop individuals and organizations to lead social impact. We recognize that the world desperately needs changemakers with the skills to lead social and environmental impact. We acknowledge that taking care of themselves is a crucial tool for those changemakers to do their work sustainably and effectively. The design of all our programming takes this into consideration.

Social Innovation Management (SIM)

The Amani Institute's flagship Social Innovation Management (SIM) post-graduate certificate is educating changemakers to build skills and gain tools to innovatively address social challenges and create a positive impact in their communities, countries, and around the world while taking care of their own well-being.

The program develops changemakers in understanding their true purpose, aligning it with social impact careers while simultaneously unlocking entre- and intrapreneurial potential and building a strong global network of like-minded people who are contributing to systemic change. Before the pandemic, the multi-month program was delivered in Brazil, Kenya, and India. In 2020, the program was converted into a digital course to ensure the continuation of changemaker education during the pandemic. By the end of 2022, there have been three cohorts of a total of 80+ changemakers who have done SIM digitally and a global alum network of over 620 people in 70+ countries.

Methodology

As the research suggests that changemakers struggle with burnout, loneliness, and feelings of being overworked, Amani Institute continuously assesses our changemakers' learning progress and impact and gets their input to ensure that the curriculum meets their needs to thrive and succeed in the social impact sector. This includes information on their life satisfaction, as we consider this to be a crucial component of well-being.

With our changemakers, we collect data on life satisfaction at the beginning and end of the program. At the beginning of the program, it is a stand-alone survey; at the end, the life satisfaction survey is embedded in a large exit evaluation of the program that evaluates other aspects of the course. Scores are calculated, and outcomes are then compared and changes evaluated for significance. It is hypothesized that going through the program will increase a changemakers life satisfaction significantly. However, we also hypothesized that the positive impact would decrease in the digital editions of the program, compared to the in-person cohorts, due to a decreased possibility for interaction and engagement.

Assessment: Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The indicator used is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al. 1985), which has "been used heavily as a measure of the life satisfaction component of subjective well-being (SWB). Scores on the SWLS have been shown to correlate with measures of mental health and be predictive of future behaviors" (Pavot and Diener 2008, 2). The authors intended it as a brief assessment of an individual's general sense of satisfaction with their whole life. Although the tool may, to some extent, be influenced by temporary contextual factors such as temporary dissatisfaction with life, most of the information used is of general nature, which means,

according to Diener and co-authors, it provides a valid holistic assessment of SWB overall, making it a relevant tool to measure the changes in life satisfaction in Amani Institute's changemaker over the course of the program.

The 5-item tool to measure life satisfaction has been validated with various communities and populations globally (Pavot and Diener 2008). The possible range of scores is 5 to 35, with a score of 20 representing the neutral point on the scale. Scores between 5 and 9 indicate that the respondent is 'extremely dissatisfied with life,' scores from 15 to 19 are interpreted as falling in the 'slightly dissatisfied' range, scores between 21 and 25 represent 'slightly satisfied,' 26 to 30 'satisfied,' whereas scores ranging between 31 and 35 indicate that the respondent is 'extremely satisfied' with life. In research across various groups (Pavot and Diener 2008), no demographic was 'extremely satisfied.' The highest scores in this research were around 27: in white female US college students and Masai in Kenya.

Findings

Since the program's inception, the SIM program has consistently led to improved life satisfaction in participating changemakers. While having a statistically significant improvement in life satisfaction throughout a 5 to 6-month program is an important indicator of the positive impact SIM can have on the individual. We also think that this will improve the well-being of changemakers in the long term, ensuring that they can successfully solve critical problems while taking care of their health and happiness.

When taking the program online due to the pandemic, we assumed that it would not be as effective digitally as in-person to increase life satisfaction in changemakers. This was not the case. The data indicated the changemakers in both groups were satisfied with life at the end of their experience, compared to slightly satisfied at the beginning of the program. There was no statistically significant difference between pre-and post-measures for the in-person cohort. The digital cohort came in with somewhat lower satisfaction with life and reported a statistically significant increase by the end. At the beginning of the digital cohort, almost 30% of changemakers were either dissatisfied or slightly dissatisfied – at the end, only 9% were slightly dissatisfied. Figure 1 compares the scores of the first digital cohort and the last pre-covid in-person cohort.
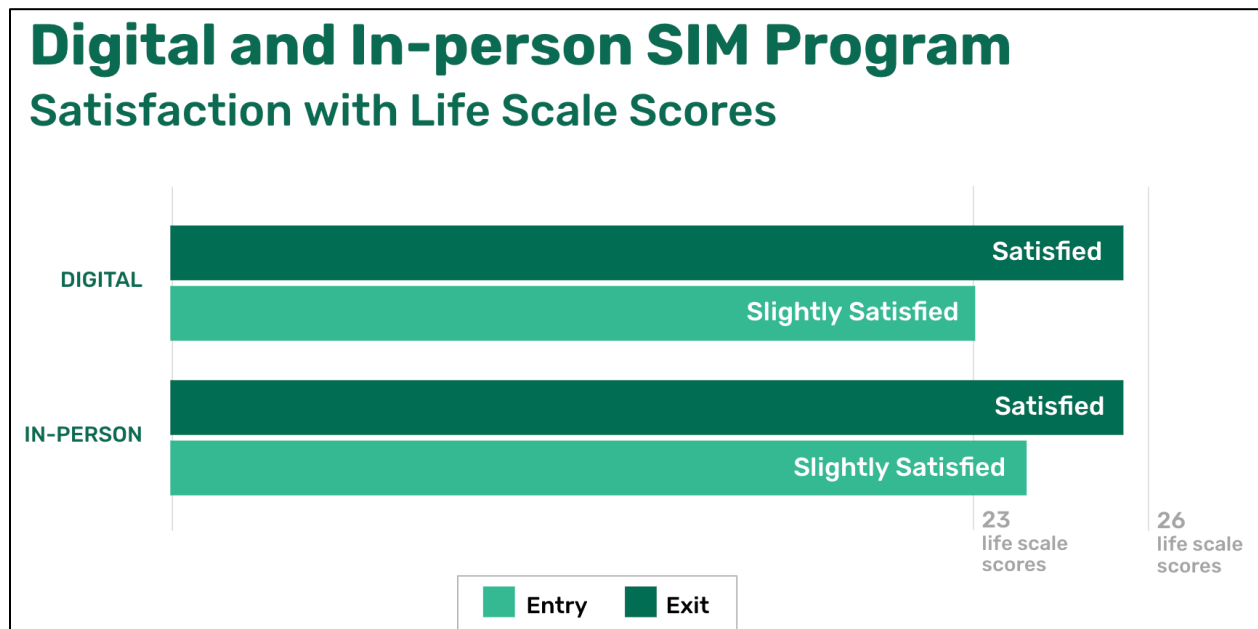
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Figure 1: SWLS in Amani Institute SIM Changemakers

Recommendations

Since the inception of the SIM program, life satisfaction has consistently improved in the participating changemakers, both in in-person and digital editions of the course. This is one of the program's desired outcomes, and the intentional design for life satisfaction and its measurement makes it unique in changemaker education.

When designing the SIM program for improved life satisfaction, we focus on four core areas that, based on the experiences with have gathered in the past ten years of running the program, as well as extensive alumni feedback, we believe are crucial for impact and better well-being of our changemakers.

Recruitment

We intentionally recruit for diversity and fit. We determine 'fit' as having a growth mindset, a keen interest in wanting to be a changemaker, and the ability to work well with a diverse group of other changemakers – during the extensive application and interview process for SIM. We believe that connecting people of different ages, backgrounds, and cultures and providing them with a collective learning experience can promote empathy – which we know is important in promoting life satisfaction.

Skills for the 21st Century

It is easier to tackle a problem if changemakers have the skills to do so. During the SIM program, changemakers learn a new skill, apply it, fail in a safe environment, and reflect on what led to success and what did not. By repeating this process in a classroom setting, we help changemakers fail and learn from their actions, leading to becoming more resilient and thus improving their satisfaction with life.

Inner Journey of the Changemaker

A central part of our program is supporting changemakers in understanding their "why" and their purpose, as well as developing a deep understanding of who they are and bringing their most authentic self forward. Those are things that changemakers need when things get tough to ground themselves in their truths.

Network

We believe in the power of connections. We have nurtured a strong community of over 620 SIM alumni worldwide. Having gone through this intense program together creates powerful and long-lasting bonds. Being able to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and support one another in a safe environment creates more resilient changemakers and can combat the feelings of loneliness changemakers can struggle with.

There are opportunities to scale current efforts and increase Amani Institutes' impact on well-being in changemaker education further. For example, we currently only track satisfaction with life twice. In the future, we would also like to do this regularly with our alum community to find out if, on average, our changemakers can maintain or further improve their well-being post-program, to ensure continued resilience and joy that will support their changemaker journeys. In addition, we will explore how, even in our short-term programs, we can more explicitly focus on increasing life satisfaction, as it is an important learning component for all changemakers.

Conclusion

Changemaker education should include intentional design elements to address and help changemakers cope with the factors that lead to burnout, dissatisfaction, and loneliness and, as an outcome, increase their life satisfaction.

At Amani Institute, we believe that we need to equip people with the skills they need, connect people with their purpose, and build strong networks of like-minded people that people can lean on when they need each other. This leads to developing resilient, strong, and satisfied changemaker communities ready to change the world.

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