

# Workplace Learning in an Aged Care Environment

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## INTRODUCTION

**‘A key to the twenty-first century, learning through life will be essential for adapting to the evolving requirements of the labour market’ (UNESCO Delors Report, 1996)**

If learning through life is essential to the labour market then workplaces are crucial in supporting, valuing and developing opportunities for learning. If this learning is to proceed in a workplace, it needs to be underpinned by a workplace culture, which nurtures it. This essay will show how, historically, the learning opportunities within this food service department, have been stifled by the organisational culture and the nursing environment, in which it exists. This can be traced to the ‘command and control’ style of leadership developed by the founder of the company and to the nursing profession, having little understanding of, or interest in, the intricacies of education relevant to food service. It will show that if you can change the values, the beliefs – the culture- then the ideal of a ‘work culture that values and contributes to learning’ (ANTA, 1999) is possible.

## LEARNING/EDUCATION/TRAINING in an Aged Care Environment

### **An Aged Care environment**

The description of the aged care industry in ‘Safe Bodies’ (Somerville & Bernoth, 2001:130) as, ‘an industry which is resource squeezed and operating on minimum levels of staffing with minimum qualifications’ is one that depicts the aged care environments with which I am familiar. In aged care, two industries operate side by side – Health Care

and Hospitality. Little understanding by nursing professionals, of the increasing skills required within food service, has seen a history of inappropriate ‘promotion’ from, for example, the cleaning area to the kitchen – no qualifications demanded except ‘you can cook for your family so you can cook for the residents’. This belief has been entrenched within the industry generally, not just my present workplace. It has impacted on both sides with nursing not understanding the specialised requirements of food service and food service staff feeling misunderstood and at the bottom of the hierarchal level. As the manager of food services within an aged care environment I recognize the responsible role employees play in executing food services/hospitality, to a frail aged community. This responsibility needs to be supported, valued and recognized by those within the department and within the organization generally. Learning opportunities for food service staff need to be provided to redress this minimum qualification or no qualification status.

### **Government Regulations and Training**

The need to promote ‘life long’ and workplace learning has been recognized in Government regulations. The positive outcome of the Aged Care Act 1997 and the Accreditation Grant Principles 1999, together with the Food Safety Standard 3.2.2, is that a framework for learning, must be established within in each workplace. Statements such as ‘Management and staff have appropriate knowledge and skills to perform their roles effectively’ (Accreditation Guide for Residential Aged Care Services 2001) and ‘Skills and knowledge commensurate with their positions’ (ANZFA Standards 3.2.2) have ensured that learning opportunities can no longer be ignored.

The reinforcement of this training requirement has seen positions for educators established within aged care facilities. One facility with which I am familiar has a position of ‘Nurse educator’; this person is responsible for the training needs of 160 staff. Obviously they are not all ‘nurses’, yet the language suggests that the primary objectives of the education, is nursing. This is a barrier to meeting the needs of Food Service personnel.

### **Learning/education/training opportunities**

The Food Service department within my workplace was restructured in May 2001, before that time there were no formal programs for learning and the informal opportunities mainly fell within a 'hidden curriculum'. Richard Edwards has argued that what is actually to be learned is not so much job skills as work habits, attendance, attitudes, and personal characteristics. (Edwards 1979:143, cited Wright S, 1994)

The catering officer and the assistant catering officer had participated in a one day Food Safety workshop and within a staff of ten, there was only one staff member who had completed any formal training, and there was one staff member who had started along the path towards Commercial Cooking qualifications. The Company had encouraged staff members to undertake Hospitality Certificate 111 – Catering Operations through on-the-job traineeships under the auspices of an outside registered training organisation. There was, and still is, considerable resistance to these traineeships by staff members.

An extensive Manual Handling, O. H & S and Infection Control education program has been provided since the impact of the 1997 regulations started to be felt through the National Accreditation process. However, while recognizing the importance of the generic nature of many of the issues handled within these programs, the fact is, that the specifics of the kitchen needs, have never been part of the program content. This emphasizes the lack of recognition of the kitchen by the program developer – the nurse educator . The program content relates to nursing – how to lift aged residents, how to avoid needle stick injuries, body fluids transmission and so on. Kitchen staff require instructions on lifting heavy stockpots, or how to ensure infection control, through safe food handling. Learning/Education/Training, if it is to be of value must 'be relevant and have a genuine meaning for students' Larsson,1996:16, cited Gerber2001:140).

Due to the divergent emphasis of nursing and hospitality, within aged care, it is not surprising that while the decision making takes place in the nursing sector, the specific needs of the hospitality/catering employees will not be met.

‘Learning for earning: learning for survival’ (Longworth, Davies:57 cited Gerber 2001:140) is the dominant motivator for most kitchen staff. Recognizing this, and facilitating knowledge development through formal, non-formal, informal and incidental learning opportunities, is the objective of the training now offered within the area of my control. The importance of stimulating interest in, and ownership of, the learning that is required to take place in this changing environment cannot be underestimated.

One of the first challenges in undertaking this position, as part of the restructuring of the production kitchens, was to develop a program of instruction that was clear, interesting, relevant, invited participation as well as reinforcing and recognising existing skills and knowledge. Many staff members had been long standing members of this workplace, however, had not been given any opportunities or encouraged to seek opportunities to expand their skills.

In the program of instruction it was vital to create a climate that was conducive to learning. From the first session it was obvious that staff members were eager and willing to learn, ready to put new knowledge into practice, had an ability to question, reason and generally demonstrated many of the skills that Longworth and Davies (1996 cited Gerber 2001:142) suggest are necessary for lifelong learning. A variety of learning opportunities have been facilitated, some were structured within a formal classroom situation where knowledge ‘organized (and) codified’ (Foley 2000: 11), needed to be disseminated, for example:

- The critical elements of a Cook Chill Kitchen
- Principles of Food Safety

However, noticing a staff member using a finger to taste a product, provided a perfect ‘non-formal’ (Foley 2000: 11) environment in which to reinforce the principles of food safety delivered in the previous formal structure. During these new beginnings many other opportunities for learning were provided. Staff members have learnt by ‘building on their own experience’ (informal learning) (Foley 2000: 11). This has been demonstrated in the way the packaging system for Meals on Wheels service has evolved.

The staff have organised a system of placing the 'special' orders in a particular way that enabled the 'normal' orders to be packaged at the same time, this differed from the original system of doing the 'special' then the 'normal'.

Together with these learning situations, making mistakes is seen as an opportunity to learn. From the cook's perspective, a burnt product will always need to be replaced. Although this is time consuming in a busy day, a product that doesn't have any flavour will generate many comments on the Quality Assurance forms. There is no evidence of the same mistake happening twice, so it can be seen that valid learning has taken place. According to Gerber in 'Learning in Small Business Enterprises' (2001:143) this is one of the 11 ways adult workers learn, other ways:

- (b) through self-education on and off the job
  - (c) through practicing one's personal values
  - (d) by applying theory and practicing skills
  - (e) through solving problems
  - (f) through interacting with other workers
  - (g) through open lateral planning
  - (h) by being an advocate for colleagues
  - (i) through offering leadership to others
  - (j) through formal training and;
  - (k) through practicing quality assurance
- (Gerber et al 1995; Gerber et al 1997; Gerber, 1998a)

In the examples above, two elements have been involved in the learning that has taken place - by making mistakes and learning not to repeat the mistake, and through the implementation of the quality assurance system as a method of feed back.

The restructuring of the Food Service department provided many opportunities for 'learning in action' (Heikkila & Makinen, 2001:338). The introduction of a totally new system, that was based on production schedules, quality assurance and delivery sheets, batch records and temperature records, cleaning schedules and stock sheets, meant that staff had to integrate new knowledge on the job. Even though formal training sessions were held to introduce the concept and hard copies of all the sheets, it was not until staff were actually using them, making mistakes and generating suggestions for improvement that the sheets and their usage became integrated into their work days.

## **Teams**

Because staff work in teams, a team for production cooking and a team for servicing this production has provided further opportunities for members to become mentors and teachers and so continue the learning process. The aim is for each team member to become familiar with each other's role and to be able to train in a 'buddy' fashion any casual staff member. The staff member training the new recruit in, say, the regeneration of food products, needs a holistic understanding of the process. They need to demonstrate competence in:

- Use of the oven
- use of the temperature probe
- recording of temperatures, and
- a necessity to reinforce why the whole process is taking place.

This, according to Molander (1996) (in Bornfelt 2001:177) demonstrated the 'orientation' knowledge of the trainer and once the trainee has achieved competence is the use of the oven or the temperature probe or the recording system, the trainee would demonstrate 'disposition' knowledge. The benefit of the team structure is the additional social interaction provided. This is said to be the 'basis for learning at work' (Heikkila, Makinen, 2001:199).

So within the organisational structure of the company, the Food Service department was able to offer a different perspective, a perspective that valued and recognised the specifics of learning within a hospitality context.

## **WORKPLACE CULTURE**

### **Workplace Culture and Training Opportunities**

While the culture that exists in this aged care environment is uniquely its own, there are common threads throughout the aged care industry. The operating systems, beliefs, values, and the symbols and language – the culture – will differ from workplace to workplace. Workplace culture and training opportunities are intrinsically linked:

'culture is taught and reproduced' (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2002;  
[www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html))

‘process of learning is an essential characteristic of culture, then teaching also is a crucial characteristic’ (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2002; [www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html))

‘what is taught and what is learned is not absolute, culture exists in a constant state of change’ (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> February [www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html))

The ‘command and control’ leadership style (accessed 25 February 2002 [http://home.att.net/~elements.of.motivation/eom-work\\_environments.hts](http://home.att.net/~elements.of.motivation/eom-work_environments.hts)) established by the founder of the aged care company I am discussing, impacted on training opportunities. Management tended to hold onto all knowledge, with only selected information filtering through to employees, which resulted in secretive environment where employees just did as they were told. If the sharing and acquiring of knowledge is the objective of learning/education/training then this was not an environment conducive to knowledge acquisition. Principles of adult learning such as:

- solving problems
  - open lateral planning
  - advocating for colleagues
  - through offering leadership to others
- (Gerber et al, 1995; Gerber et al, 1997: Gerber, 1998a )

were not encouraged by this ‘command and control’ style..

So while the preferred leadership style of this Company was as above it was also combined with a hierarchical organizational structure. Until 1998 the founder made all decisions. Currently, a management team is in control and apart from one member, the ‘command and control’ style is deeply entrenched.

Interestingly, most aged care environments’ have a hierarchical structure.

The Director of Nursing

The Deputy Director of Nursing  
The Nursing Unit managers  
The Registered Nurses  
The Enrolled Nurses and Assistants in Nursing

This traditional structure combined with the ‘command and control’ leadership style inhibited learning opportunities within my workplace. Those opportunities that were provided were directly linked to a nursing environment. Yet, staff attracted to food service inevitably respond to training that is linked directly with their work and particularly to training that has a creative bias. The nursing professions fulfill the most essential and basic biological needs – ‘food, water, and oxygen .....a person would die if they were not met’ (Malsow: accessed 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2002, <http://www.mrdowling.com/602-maslow.html>). Food Service endeavour to not only provide food for sustenance, but to provide interesting, varied and attractively presented menu items that will be inviting to residents.

This founder’s belief that formal workplace education was a waste of time has had to be modified since his death – as mentioned, government regulations have ensured that to receive funding, aged care establishments must meet certain standards and education and training are defined in those standards. The basic tenant of the government regulations, both in aged care and food safety, is that you must be able to validate – ie. what you say you do is actually what you do. So training opportunities must be easily recognized. It could be said that this aged care organization had been ‘pressured’ into offering learning/training/education opportunities. The belief that being seen to do something rather than the belief that something worthwhile can be achieved, has been a consequence of this pressure. A training culture has not been present.

The absence of training culture is evidenced by the suspicion felt by staff members undertaking Hospitality Certificate 111, Catering Operations on the job traineeships. Many of the units, are not seen to be ‘relevant and have a genuine meaning’ (Larsson,1996:16, cited Gerber,2001:140). In the unit, ‘Prepare Stocks and Sauces’, the competency states, ‘the employee has the knowledge and skills to prepare stocks and sauces’. The reality of this work place is that staff do not make stocks, glazes or

essences. A tin of stock base is opened and used to make a sauce. The staff know that this skill – of opening the tin – would not satisfy the stock making requirements of many other facets of the catering industry. So instead of achieving a transferable skill, it actually reinforces what they don't know and traps them. Training should be liberating. In these on-the-job traineeships, workplace supervisors are 'to deliver the training according to a negotiated training program' (Misko, 2000). No training (in stock making) has been offered. So while management can suggest that training, through the traineeships, is offered, the motivating principle behind these traineeships has been to access some of the government funds on offer, not to develop a learning environment. Management regards the number of employees involved in traineeships as a testament to their success.

The system had always been that of a benevolent dictator so that when traineeships were offered it was a case of just 'doing as I say'. Staff did not feel they had any choice in the matter. They were not encouraged to 'own' their learning, and this is essential, if learning is to be successful.

If training opportunities are only seen as ensuring Government regulations are fulfilled so that funding can be received, then it is unlikely that the empowering aspects of training will be valued. The funding received does not find its way back into departments to fund further training. In fact, while the Company does provide money on an occasional basis for training, there is no department budget as such. This is a legacy of the 'command and control' style.

While many of the signs, symbols, language – culture – of the organization can remain static, the signs, symbols, language – culture – of a department can change. In the 12 months since the restructure of the catering department occurred, a change has taken place. By developing an ethos within the catering department that has encouraged staff input into the on going development of systems, that recognized the value of their prior knowledge, suggesting mistakes become opportunities to learn, a new atmosphere is emerging. There is a greater cooperation between staff members within the catering department and the other departments – the catering staff have 'ownership' of what they are doing.

The structured Food Service program at this point includes: a Self-paced Learning kit, two face-to-face group sessions, and a self-directed topic. Knowledge is now a commodity to share. The information belongs to the group. Through this the staff are developing the confidence that they have the knowledge and the skills commensurate with their positions, which in turn gives them greater confidence when dealing with the nursing side of the organization. No longer is the content of infection control and manual handling in the exclusive hands of the ‘nurse educator’ – the content now relates to a hospitality environment. This workplace is a testament to the fact that ‘culture exists in a constant state of change’ [www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definition.html)

### **Conclusion**

The ‘nature of work has changed’ (Heikkila, Makine 2001); workers are constantly required to put new learning into practice, to manage new technologies to take greater responsibility for every act they perform. This has been demonstrated within the food service department since the restructure 12 months ago. Production schedules, quality assurance and delivery sheets all had to become familiar, new computer temperature logging devices needed to be managed, and government regulations demanded workers take responsibility for accurate recording processes. Sharing knowledge through formal, informal and incidental opportunities, staff have contributed their ideas and seen them integrated into a number of systems. Through specific food service training programs, staff are developing more confidence in their knowledge and this in turn has led to more confidence in dealing with nursing co-workers. Training has encouraged all to strive to do ‘little things better’ (Roberts; 1999:99). Where a culture of secrecy and suspicion existed, it has been replaced by a culture of openness and sharing. Finally, it can be argued that, because of the intimate relationship between workplace culture and training, if a learning culture can be achieved, then it has potential; to change the way we think, what we believe and the things we do.

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