

Caregivers, Community Service and Workplace Culture

A description and analysis of workplace culture at Sun Shine Community Service Incorporated

Phillip Bell

Introduction

In considering and analysing workplace culture, it is first necessary to define what is meant by 'workplace culture'. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to use Cole's definition which states "Workplace culture may be described as: 'The collection of unwritten rules, codes of behaviour and norms by which people operate; *how we do things around here*'." (Cole in Caruso, 2001:73)

In the light of this definition I will consider and analyse the culture of Sun Shine Community Service Incorporated¹ (hereafter 'Sun Shine'). In my analysis I will consider the following areas: historical, global, local (regional setting, management structure, the office, staff, recent expansion), social, governance, money/grants, technology and training.

Historical

Sun Shine is a Community Access service in Pinkerton, Northern Territory, which was initially founded in July 1991. The Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government jointly funded the service, with the Australian Red Cross Society as the auspicing body. In September 1991 a Steering Committee was formed. This body met monthly and assumed the responsibility for policy and financial matters. Following this, in November 1993, Sun Shine became an Incorporated Association. The Steering Committee evolved into a Committee of Management and took full control of the service in June 1994. (Bell 2001:3)

Global

Over the past fifty years there has been, and continues to be, an enormous change in the role of the caregiver. This has included a complete swing from caregiver to support worker. Originally, the role of the caregiver was primarily a nursing role and little

¹ Names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals and organisations.

consideration was given to the emotional well-being of the person with the disability. People were predominantly housed in large facilities and institutionalised.

The changing role of the workers has required a total restructuring within the disability sector. Today, the provision for each person must now be considered in a more holistic way (physically, emotionally and spiritually), thus meaning that there is a specific focus on quality of life, choice, integration, independence, self-esteem and enabling the person to occupy a valued role within society (Wolfensberger1998:58).

No longer are the workers required to simply provide for physical needs, but they are now required to develop ways that encourage each person with a disability to reach their own potential in life. This requirement has become so central to the operation of the service that the focus of the mission statement is directed to this end. It states:

This service provides for people with disabilities and high support needs, promoting: -

- A quality of life
- Dignity of choice that stimulates and promotes maximum participation
- Integration
- A person's participation in community life and activities,

In addition to the changing focus of the support worker, there has also become a major focus towards computerisation. Computerisation demands greater versatility and computer literacy has become essential for all workers, thus highlighting the need for multi-skilling in the workforce. All final reporting and data collation requires computerisation and there is an insistence on quality and accountability. Support workers at Sun Shine are now required to be able to move from access support (day activity program) to respite care (24-hour care), from field to office, from individual to group type activities and from an ordinary car licence (c class) to a 'c class' licence with an 'h' endorsement on their licence. These activities varied considerably and depended on the area of service they were currently working in. For instance, in access this included working with a group of up to 6 clients on activities such as swimming, cooking, shopping, picnicking, walking, and tourism outdoors activity whilst respite generally involved one-to-one, with daily activities in the house, such as cooking, cleaning, washing and around the house generally. The bus was frequently used in conjunction with both access and respite programs. It involved the manoeuvring of a large vehicle along with the operation of the lift for the loading and unloading of clients in wheelchairs.

Furthermore, on the whole there is, within the funding stipulations, a general requirement of 'more-for-less'. The community service industry in the Northern Territory has had a changing face over the past 15 years. The industry has implemented National and State Standards, Quality Improvement or Quality Assurance Standards and Disability Service Standards. With this has come the need for all staff to move towards having qualifications. As a result Sun Shine has moved towards improving the certificate levels of all staff. Previously, staff worked in this field with little or no formal qualifications.

Local

Regional Setting

Pinkerton is a regional centre for an area of approximately 340,000 square kilometres and extends from the Western Australian to the Queensland borders. While the town has a population of around 11,500 there is a total regional population of approximately 19,000. Within the Territory, Aboriginal people comprise 28% of the population. Over 69% of this population resides in rural or remote communities ranging in population from 100 to 2000 (THS, 1996). There are also over 600 smaller communities, including some family outstations consisting of less than 20 people (NTDLP & E, 1997). Each community differs greatly in its cultural, social and economic history as well as its geographical and climatic location. These factors have a great impact on the level of infrastructure. Within these communities there is little to no support in place for people with disabilities. In the wet season (October – May), many roads are impassable and sometimes, even airstrips are temporarily closed due to poor weather conditions. (Bell 2001:1) These conditions made it very difficult for the transportation of clients to and from respite. From time to time staff were required to accompany clients to and from their community. This involved flying or driving out to the community and supporting them on their trip into Pinkerton for respite. At the end of the respite period the client was then accompanied back to the community.

Due to the small size of the Pinkerton Township, services within the community are limited. The services that are available to the broader community often do not consider accessibility factors for the disabled; for example, the craft centre is located on second floor with no lifts available. (Bell, 2001:1) Transience within the population often results in high staff turnover and the necessity to hire staff with minimal qualifications. Moreover, there can be difficulties in maintaining lasting relationships with different community sectors, which also have high staff turnover.

Management Structure

The Management Committee is made up of six to eight volunteers from within the community (some parents, some are workers from related service areas and other community members with varied interests). The manager is directly responsible to the Management Committee and staff are responsible to the manager who follows through policy and decisions as determined by the Committee.

The staff is predominately female (often about 80%) and consists of six full-time and up to four casual employees. Casual employees often have second jobs in related industries. Current staff provide a far greater effect on the overall tone and culture of the workplace than does the Management Committee. It is the staff who attend to the day-to-day operation of the service and it is the staff who provide input and are involved in planning at all weekly staff meetings. Moreover, the implementation of Quality Improvement has required staff to suggest and follow through improvements wherever they felt it was appropriate. This involvement of the staff has changed the working relationship between support worker and management and would also appear to have contributed to the significant reduction in staff turnover.

The Office

Sun Shine is a small community organisation located within the central business district. The office is the main meeting area at the start and end of the day. It is an L-shape and is located within a larger office complex. The entrance is a single door, which opens into the main meeting area. There is one large kitchen table in the centre of the room with eight chairs around it and a kitchen sink set behind it. The table is used as a conference table, meeting area, kitchen and preparation area as well as a general staff facility area. A smaller room to the right is the manager's office with the main computer, printer and scanner all located on his desk. The end of the manager's desk includes a small rounded end, which is the table used for small conferences. At the end of the large room there is a narrow internal passage with no windows. In here are housed the general office facilities, which include two desks, each with a desktop computer and a photocopier nearest the door end. A storage unit is positioned in the middle, and the co-ordinator is located at the end of the passage. Most of the operation with the clients is out and about in the community at different localities, such as shops, picnics areas, arts and craft facilities, cafeterias, library and swimming pool.

With the constant movement of people in the main office area and the closeness of the office environment, confidentiality can become an issue. Consequently, within the office culture there is a policy that no names are used for staff and / or clients. Initials of first and last names are used for referring to people and if two people have the same initials then the middle initial is used as well. There are also a lot of acronyms used and familiarising oneself with the local terminology all takes time especially with new staff members. (An example of a conversation could be “TB is going to meet with DCLS at the YMCA and they want PB to support him.” “Phil you have a meeting with ACROD, CC, DCLS and housing today.”)

Staff

Support work requires a lot of walking around the town, so fitness is essential. Clothing is generally casual and light with good footwear required. The office staff, that is manager and co-ordinator, generally wear more formal clothing but the general dress code is casual.

In addition, workers are required to be outdoors for a large part of the day. While the early dry season provides a pleasant outdoor environment with a limited range of community options, the end of the dry season is extremely hot (40° or more by 9am in the morning with 80% humidity) and unpleasant and the range of options becomes more limited. These options are further reduced in the wet season when weather affects outdoor options and thereby causes work activities to be very limited and with little variation. Outdoor activities, such as picnics, nature walks and swimming become infrequent, leaving indoor activities as the main option. During this period it is essential for management to provide a constant refocusing on the mission statement in order to maintain a freshness.

Workers generally work in teams or small groups with the clientele. (Staff work in teams of two to three with a clientele of between two to six.) The co-ordinator runs the day-to-day organisation of the staff. The Manager has the responsibility of all programmes (access, respite and transportation), and is directly responsible to the committee.

Recent Expansion

In the period from 1997 to the end of 2001 Sun Shine saw tremendous growth and expansion. Previously it had only an access program for eleven clients and a dormant supported accommodation program.

Throughout these four years the service developed and expanded to include a further seven clients in the access program, an established respite program a youth program and the establishment of a bus program with wheelchair access with individualised funding attached to each. The bus program also reached into the community, providing a service for a further six people. In addition, Sun Shine secured one house from the Northern Territory Housing Commission, which has been used to provide respite accommodation and house some of the day activities for the access program. (Bell 2001:5).

As the organisation expanded, staff were put under a lot of pressure and were frequently asked to do overtime, double shifts and assist new casual employees.

Social

Sun Shine has a predominately indigenous clientele, so the way staff view cultural perspective has a very greater influence on the workplace. The value system the staff use, needs to be in line with the values and culture of the clientele with whom they were working. The staff employed were from different cultural backgrounds including urban and rural Australian, Indonesian, Filipino, European and Aboriginal. Dilemmas frequently arose as a result of differing cultural values between staff and clients. As a result, the staff were given opportunity at weekly staff meetings to discuss and clarify appropriate ways to operate in different situations. The manager maintained an open-door approach to assist staff to deal with issues as they arose and staff would approach the coordinator or manager with their concerns.

In raising the profile of the disability sector in the community, the staff and management of Sun Shine embarked on community education regarding disability issues. The support workers were in the public arena most of the time and would feedback to the weekly staff meetings relevant issues as they arose, such as access issues for wheelchairs, disability facilities and so on. At times, comments from community people (both negative and positive) were fed back to management and this always reinforced the fact that the public eye is always watching.

Equity and disability issues within the community arose from time to time. Staff worked as advocates with the clientele and were encouraged to report these issues at staff meetings or to management as they arose. The issues were discussed and dealt with at a systemic level. From time to time incidents arose with the treatment of clients by shopkeepers, attendants

and waiters who would address the support worker rather than the client who is purchasing from the store. Wheelchair access to shops is an ongoing issue. While some shops have put in ramps and handrails, stairs continue to present a frequent problem. Issues arising with access to toilets also occur regularly and consultation with the Town Council is ongoing.

Governance

A committee of management governs Sun Shine. The committee receives funding from government grants and all moneys must be acquitted according to governmental conditions. These conditions have mainly centred on accountability and include Quality Improvement, statistical information, auditing and the enormous complexities of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). All have placed a tremendous administrative burden on the organisation, and its management. In addition, no funding has been allocated to allow for training or the higher management skills now required. Henry (2001:103) supports this and comments that Government policy and accountability have been the most significant factor in recent years.

The committee members are largely unskilled, voluntary members of the community. Each year an Annual General Meeting is held in September and each year it struggles to get a quorum. Consequently, the same group is re-elected and changes happen very slowly. No one person wants the responsibility of chairperson or treasurer, even though there are people on the committee with the skills. As a result, unskilled people have been elected in these positions for the past three years. The manager has traditionally filled the secretary's position (paid position).

The Committee meets monthly. The Constitution requires that Meeting Minutes and information for discussion be received seven days in advanced. However, it was often difficult to get a monthly quorum together and each month the manager contacted each committee member on the day of the meeting to confirm that those who said they would come, would be there. Henry (2001:98) notes that getting a quorum together is a major issue for many community organisations and while committee meetings were seldom cancelled or postponed at Sun Shine, the stress on the manager in ensuring a quorum was significant. This was further exacerbated by the fact that, on many occasions the committee was hesitant to make decisions and often elected to hold related discussions at the next meeting. This pattern could continue for any number of months on any one issue. A

frequent comment would be, “we have not had enough time to read the minutes from last meeting” or “we do not have enough time to consider it now.” As a result it was very difficult to get decisions made and frequently caused tremendous frustration with the ongoing movement of the service. Henry, (2001:98) in discussing the committee of management, notes that the current culture is to use a very soft line approach. Indecisions become frequent and this is further extenuated by the fact that this group is not involved in any of the day-to-day operations of the service.

The effectiveness of the committee depends solely on the commitment made to the service. Management meetings were often rushed because people want to be ‘out in an hour’. Communication between manager and committee was minimal between meetings. Many of the committee members had heavy commitments of their own and found it difficult to organise times to discuss matters pertaining to Sun Shine. All these factors constantly hindered the effectiveness and future planing of Sun Shine.

Furthermore, it can be noted that the governing culture is greatly affected and influenced by the people that fill these positions. It is the staff, however that supports the committee, rather than the reverse. Dawson (in Henry 2001:6) notes that this is common amongst all smaller community organisations.

Money/Grants

Historically, grants were given in a block amount to fund the service. The funding agreement stipulated the number of clients for which the funding was to provide and included administration costs. There was little or no accountability, and to a large extent the funding was on the basis of trust. As organisations were predominately benevolent in nature, funding was mostly, if not always used to service clientele. Over the years however, governments have been placed under pressure for accountability. As a result organisations have been required to increase data collection, reporting, administrative and program management. (Henry 2001:104) Consequently, monies have been redirected from clients to administrative support and this has impacted on the capability of service delivery.

In addition, government policy has changed from a closed market to an open market agenda and from block grants to individual funding options. This has further resulted in a shift of service. Services now need to be more flexible and respond to client needs. This

cultural change has brought about significant pressure on management to find new incentives, to keep up with trends and pass this on through the service. Such a change in focus impacts, not only on management, but permeates every part of the service. As previously stated, the flexibility of workers and continuous flow of employees puts a greater pressure on all staff.

Furthermore, the introduction of funding from many sources and more recently the introduction of the goods and services tax have created the need to actively recruit trained people to better manage the financial systems. (Henry 2001:104)

Technology

Over the past four years at Sun Shine there has been a dramatic increase in technology. Previously, there was one computer for the service that was available for all staff. Accounts had become electronically recorded, however pays were still manual. Between 1997 and 2001 all financial, administrative and data collation was maintained digitally. The one computer was replaced and increased to three desktops, one laptop, a scanner and three printers.

With the increase in technology has come a complete restructuring of the office. It has influenced the way in which information is recorded and greatly extended options with communication. Through the Internet /email facility, information and communication were readily available to the organisation and isolation in information was no longer a limiting factor.

Historically, staff were employed on the basis of availability. As people remained, they developed a high level of competence in the field and they were promoted as vacancies arose. With this trend, people often had a good understanding of support but were limited in their understanding of management and technology. Henry (2001:105) notes that this is a common trend and keeping ahead of the computer age, with no staff professional development plans has been awkward and painful.

Training

Traditionally, support workers often had fairly minimal education. Sun Shine provided training primarily through experience and using a hands-on approach. Each week there

was a two-hour session, which involved staff meeting, training or review of service and clientele, thereby providing opportunity for staff development.

The budget for training was minimal. When training opportunities did arise within the community sector such as through Red Cross (lifting techniques), Darwin Disability Resource Unit (Challenging Behaviour Management) and Disability Community Legal Service an Advocacy Unit (Duty of Care) Sun Shine supported enthusiastically. At best, training tended to be spasmodic or ad hoc and in 2000 the manager submitted a three-year plan to the committee to deal with this issue and enable staff to be recognised with qualifications. The plan included Certificate level training for all current staff. Consequently, staff went from no formal qualification to two staff with the Certificate in Community Service (Disability) III and three with Certificate IV.

This resulted in the staff gaining confidence and becoming more interactive with each other. Assistance was given from all levels of the workforce, and the support workers provided assistance to each other and the manager and vice versa. Solidarity greatly increased between workers as a result.

Conclusion

As has been noted, there is a strong workplace culture operating throughout Sun Shine. This has its roots in its historical background in the community/non-profit sector. Today, however, the shifting trends in Government policies (from benevolence to fee-for-service) and the implications of enormous administrative requirements with quality improvement and accountability has also had a great influence. While to a large extent the workers and governance impact on the culture of the workplace, there are additional factors that also bring pressure on this. These include things such as governmental policies and funding agreements. Henry quotes ACE quite adeptly.

A key factor is: Funding changes – including loss of direct infrastructure funding, increased pressure and competition within the broader community/non profit sector (in Henry 2001:106).

It can thereby be noted that the surrounding community and its geographical location, the dynamics of the current staff and governance, the current governmental trends and policies all work together to form the reigning culture of the workplace.

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