The Impact of Person-Centred Training on Sunshine Staff

Knox, M., O'Connor, B., Gadow, F. & O'Brien, P. (2013)

The Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home at Pymble noted in its Annual Report (2010-11) that its move to person centredness and links to individualised funding would "completely redefine the way we do business" (p. 1) and recognised the need to embrace change throughout its organisation. The Sunshine organisation invited the Centre for Disability Studies (CDS) to provide person centred training for staff and to evaluate its impact on staff values, service philosophy and practices.

This report documents the findings of the program implementation. The study aimed

a) to examine the impacts of the program on the champions;

b) explore the champions' experiences across the stages of the program; and

c) examine the impacts on staff of their person centred approaches to service delivery, their attitudes to and satisfaction with their work.

The professional development program targeted 20 person centred champions chosen from across the organisation as having the capabilities to innovate through the infusion of new ways of thinking and become a direct means of influence in helping colleagues to transform their approaches to person centred practice.

Data collection methods comprised participant diaries and focus group interviews planned for use at three collections points: pre- and post-professional development workshops and again four months after the completion of the workshops. Stimulus questions guided participants' responses in both the diary and focus group formats. Two rating scales were planned for use at the initial and final collection points.

Seventeen of the 20 champions agreed to be involved in the evaluation. Only two were able to complete the rating scales on both occasions; therefore, these results were not included. Five champions completed diaries; one each returned five, four and two diaries respectively and two submitted one diary each. Several commented on their value as a reflective tool. Two focus group sessions were conducted at each data collection point, with 17 (each eight and nine members) in the pre- and post- sessions and 15 in the final session at approximately four months.

Diary Responses

Participants identified: successes in supporting people and working with colleagues, seeking to improve communication and being excited about the prospect of change. They reported challenges such as staff conflict and defensiveness, lack of problem solving to find workarounds for difficult situations and addressing the consequences of understaffing or insufficient time to address issues. Solutions offered included building staff interpersonal skills and improving morale through conflict resolution; making organisational communication more effective; focusing on culture change from individualistic to team-orientated; and using personal change strategies such as being more self-aware, assertive, planful, and learning to delegate and mentor.

Person centred planning (PCP) skills used and shared included personal support for staff members, emphasising focus on the people supported and meeting with staff and people receiving support together to share in holistic planning processes. Workshops for staff and people supported together, one-to-one supervision and modelling opportunities to reinforce the focus on the person were suggested. Staff indicated they were comfortable in both using and sharing PCP approaches.

Suggestions to ensure continuity of skill following the professional development program included practising and applying them in different work areas; reflecting and being mindful of others and seeking support to extend mentoring across organisational areas.

High points noted included working successfully with people supported and their families; reviewing people's progress with staff and communicating across organisational areas and adopting regenerative strategies such as fresh ideas for a new week or drawing on inspirational stories of others with disabilities succeeding in life.

Low points noted were negative issues such as staff conflict and disappointment with lapses in communicating important health information of people supported across organisational areas; concerns about the speed of embedding the PCP approach across the organisation and disappointment with personal reactions to shortcomings in desired performance.

Ways forward involved having the resolve to improve interpersonal skills, insights, time management and flexibility; supporting and encouraging staff teamwork and acknowledging frustrations but finding ways to channel energies into solving conflict; and dealing with time concerns regarding information sessions and relating with people supported.

Focus groups

The initial focus groups were designed to glean information that would inform the professional development program for the PCP champions.

Staff awareness of person centredness and its implications for their work included:

- helping people, their families and staff to engage them (the people supported) in identifying their dreams and aspirations, to make choices, to enjoy leisure and work, and to live as independently as possible in the community

- adopting a holistic approach to understanding each person's unique requirements, their opportunities and vulnerabilities, and how families can adjust to their growing independence

- enabling staff as well as people supported to balance risks and opportunities - make and learn from their mistakes, analysing what worked or did not work in decisions and actions taken BUT at the same time bringing management on this journey with them in relation to risk management and possible finding implications

- creating respectful relationships with the people they supported and working collaboratively.

Staff concerns included:

- perceived excessive form completion linked to ISOs and funding requirements, as well as managing risk related to possible litigation, along with excessive travel to supporting people in remote locations, all of which tended to draw from their time to support people effectively

- creating effective involvement of and support for families who needed to adjust from a lifetime of caring for their family member.

Challenges included:

- re-thinking groupings of people living together, and staffing arrangements made for administrative and budgetary convenience, which could impinge on individuals' choices

- working as champions with other staff to balance their motivational and supervisory role dimensions

- gaining balance between required documentation and the organisation's risk-averse management approach, through a major organisational review.

These champions were keen to commence the workshops and share their learning with staff to ensure they became practised as effective listeners to understand requests of the people they supported.

The second focus groups were used to ascertain the impact of the training on the champions' work and seek feedback from them about its usefulness and effectiveness.

Participants indicated they enjoyed the sessions, were inspired and motivated to be more person centred, gain more confidence and insight to applying the principles, and believed they could achieve the philosophy in the organisation.

They found the structure and the content of the program to be well-spaced, giving them time to process in a concrete way the ideas presented; the problem-solving approaches and tools demonstrated led them to a clearer understanding of PCP; the session helped to reflect on past mistakes and find new ways to implement the principles.

They indicated preparedness to implement the principles within their own areas and the wider organisation, getting to know colleagues in different roles across the service areas to benefit implementation with people holistically, and looking forward to hearing the Executive's views on how to progress changes.

The challenges they anticipated were:

- some staff using the tools too narrowly and the champions becoming complacent in their own practices

- gaining balance between the organisation's need for paperwork and taking time to help support workers to identify and address aspirations of people supported

- building compatibility between requests of people supported and availability of resources to achieve these

- ensuring follow-up meetings were productive.

Three major shortcomings noted in the program were the lack of time in the final two days to complete and process activities, having time to develop comfort in engaging in rounds involving self-disclosure, and gaining better knowledge and practice in developing PCPs for people with complex and high support needs.

Several approaches they learned in the program were identified as benefiting their work on PC Planning:

- role modelling PC techniques to increase participation of people receiving support

- role modelling reflection, to change their style of staff supervision and to encourage staff to explore ideas fully with others and challenge their own thinking and ways of working

- improving meeting facilitation

- encouraging flexibility and creativity in the ways PCPs are developed

- identifying opportunities to challenge systems and enable past practices to give way to PC approaches.

This last point was viewed as critical, because many viewed existing organisational approaches, including onerous documentation around people's goals and service programs, as limiting the potential for PCP to succeed. Some saw the need for policy guideline development to support the PCP introduction, a matter to be raised with the Executive. The champions were keen to maintain their links with external mentors, believing such ongoing input would sustain their efforts.

The final focus groups approximately four months after the completion of training were used to seek feedback about how the training helped the champions to disseminate and embed PCP practices in the organisation.

Participants indicated that the training experience had both cemented and extended their understanding of PCP, emphasising reflection and involvement of the person supported as the keys to successful implementation. Some saw funding as having undue influence on the way service systems were orientated, which tended to clash with the person centred philosophy.

Opportunities they saw to embed the PC approach in the organisation included:

- being creative about how staffing rosters are set

- modifying existing practices through modelling to, and collaborating with, staff regarding one-page profiles, seeing these as a work in progress and learning opportunities to wrestle with new ideas and develop more reflective strategies

- involving clients and their families more transparently in planning

- continuing champions' group meetings and external monitoring programs, increasing the champions group membership to devolve influence more broadly in the organisation.

Constraints they identified included:

- restrictive ways of viewing clients, focusing on problems rather than the potential of people supported

- restrictive ways of viewing settings as congregate rather than personal in nature, impacted by funding and accountability constraints

- restrictive ways of managing paperwork, a job to complete and file away rather than used as learning tools.

Challenges reported comprised:

- creating flexible work opportunities that balance worker conditions with client's requirements

- harnessing champions to influence the organisation's management.

Participants valued taking part in the workshops. The strategy of deep listening appears to have genuinely permeated their ways of working.

The champion participants believed they benefitted from the training, which they found both thought provoking and enjoyable. They valued the manner of presentation, which enabled them time for reflection about new skills they were employing in the workplace. The training had a deep impact on their work with people supported by Sunshine as well as with their work colleagues. It also had a deep and transformative impact on their personal lives, as they sought to re-arrange their priorities around their relationships and events in their personal lives.

To maintain the momentum for change, champions are to be encouraged in continuing their informed practices and disseminating such approaches more broadly in the organisation. Peer support groups can assist in this process. While champions reported being able to influence the culture and staff practices in their work settings to varying degrees through staff meetings and modelling, they were concerned that some resistance from colleagues finding it difficult to move from traditional practices that conflicted with the person centred approach. Although there was a sense of cultural shift occurring, implications for staff recruitment and ongoing training were evident.

The champions reported having some difficulties getting the PCP message through different layers of Sunshine management because organisational and structural barriers and competing priorities seemed to hinder change. An additional workshop was held with the champions and management staff to address these issues.

Action research principles were used in designing the workshops to ensure participants expressed professional development needs were addressed. However, this approach could be extended in the future to allow for shared decisions making as participants have input to decisions throughout the entire project, consistent with the principles underpinning person centred concepts.

The champions and indeed the wider Sunshine organisation are to be congratulated on their achievements during this project.

References

Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home. (2011). *The Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home Annual Report 2011*. Sydney: Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home. Retrieved from http://www.sunshinehome.net.au/pdf/Annual_Report_2011.pdf