

EXPERIENCE MATTERS: avoiding the Grumpy Trap

*Engaging long serving staff in the change process in
youth work settings*

*I want to be able to
share my professional
experience with new
workers*

*I want to
enjoy my work*

*I want to use
my skills and
talents*

*I want to be
valued*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” James Baldwin

Context

Children and Young People’s Services in the SW Region have a workforce which is older than the national average with individual youth workers who are more likely to have been in post for 5 years or more (*JNC Workforce Survey 2002*). The advantages of this are stability in service delivery, and experienced staff remain in posts which have close contact with children and young people.

However, this stability can at the same time have disadvantages. It can lead to frustration for experienced staff, younger workers and managers, about lack of progression, and cynicism amongst long serving staff about the benefits of frequent new initiatives which change the structure, context and potentially the content of their work. There is a feeling amongst youth work employers that some older workers amongst this tier of staff can act as significant barriers to changes in the way the work is conducted.

The ‘Experience Matters Project’ emerged out of this context. The Project was initiated by the Regional Youth Work Unit at Learning South West, in response to concerns about this issue raised by Principal Youth Officers, Directors of Children and Young People’s Services and Senior Youth Work Managers. It was designed to work in a more focused way with older staff in Youth and Children’s Services, and seek ways of positively using their experience and re-engaging them in the process of structural and cultural change in work with young people.

The South West Opportunities for Older People (SWOOP) programme provided a timely opportunity for us to put our plans into action, as SWOOP was keen to develop projects that focused on the needs and responsibilities of employers of older people. Although this project works specifically with the public sector youth work providers, we believe that its findings are relevant in many different sectors, and would be of interest to any sector or organisation in which the workforce includes a significant percentage of workers over the age of 50.

We anticipated that employers in Children & Young People’s Services would benefit from a more motivated and enthusiastic older workforce, who would be more willing to participate positively in change processes, and use their experience of previous change to inform current developments. Older employees would benefit from having their

experience and expertise recognised, valued and used more creatively by employers and other members of the Children and Young Peoples' workforce. All would benefit by identifying and developing practices in new organisational settings and multi disciplinary working to meet the challenges of continuous change.

Initial Project Plan

Aims

From the outset, the project aims were identified as:

- Recognise and build on the collective and individual experience of participants in implementing and managing creative work with young people.
- Engage participants in action research to test out aspects of practice.
- Support participants in providing mutual support and challenging through buddying and peer review.
- Enable participants to take on more creative roles in managing the environment in which they work.
- Help employers to identify ways of engaging experienced workers more effectively

Outcomes

- Greater understanding of the age related barriers that prevent experienced workers from contributing to change processes in the workplace.
- Establishment of supportive and challenging networks for experienced staff, to support their continuing professional development.
- Provision of opportunities for experienced staff to demonstrate their abilities to establish and implement creative practice, thus enhancing their professional standing in their organisations.
- Increased awareness amongst employers of aspects of the workplace experience which inhibit or support experienced workers' capacity.

Outputs

As a result of the Experience Matters project we would:

- Disseminate the results of the project through a project report, publications and seminars/workshops for employers
- Design a training package which could be offered to employers, or groups of employers to address the issues of ageing with their workforce

Structure

Steering Group: we established a Steering Group of youth work employers who met twice in the initial planning stages of the programme, and contributed to the design as it emerged. Since all members of the Steering Group were also members of existing regional networks, in September 2006, it was agreed to discontinue Steering Group meetings, and instead, use the Regional Trainers Group as the reference group for the project. This group met 4 times during the project, and received reports and discussed the project on each occasion

Project Staff: The Project Manager was the Regional Youth Work Adviser at Learning South West. Much of the actual delivery of the project was carried out by a Learning South West Associate, with considerable experience in youth work, management and training. The Learning South West administrative and finance team provided support to the programme. We originally intended to use another consultant to facilitate the planned residential event, but this was not necessary in the final version. Alan Denbigh from the SWOOP central team also played a key role in planning and delivering the programme.

Methods

In order to achieve the aims and outcomes of the Project the initial plan was to use the following processes in order to achieve the aims:

- Use the Regional Youth Work Unit (RYWU) networks and contacts to recruit up to 20 'older' youth workers, and those from other professional backgrounds who work with 13-19 year olds to a professional development programme
- Begin the programme with a 2 day residential workshop to explore issues for older workers, introduce the concept of 'action research' to develop and evaluate their practice in their workplaces, and establish ongoing opportunities for individual 'coaching' to support them in their workplace
- Support participants to undertake action research projects in their workplace to demonstrate their continued ability to work creatively with young people
- Use the experience of participants and employers to identify issues which need to be addressed in the workplace if older workers are to retain their enthusiasm and work effectively.

Learning from Experience

The reality of the project was somewhat different to the original plan, and we believe there is considerable learning to be gained from examining the factors that led to the changes.

Recruitment

Initially the project was intended to work only with Local Authority Youth Services, with which the RYWU has very strong links, as we were confident that we would be able to identify and recruit participants who would benefit from the project from within the Youth Services. However, at an early stage we discussed the project with the Directors of Children and Young People's Services, who indicated that the issues we had identified affected staff in all parts of Children's Services, and the project should be opened to a broader spectrum of staff. We agreed to open it up to all those working with 13-19 year olds, and the Directors said they would actively identify and recruit staff who they felt would benefit from involvement. As a result, the initial publicity for the event was circulated to Directors of Children & Young People's Services and Connexions Partnership Chief Executives as well as Youth Services.

Unfortunately, the response from the field was limited. It seems that the Directors did not actively recruit or encourage staff to attend (with hindsight, it was unrealistic to expect that they would engage at this level). Our attempts to make the programme look interesting to those not involved in youth work seemed to make it less attractive to our original target group. Unintentionally, the promotional flyer gave the impression that it was a programme for 'the Grumpies' (those who are stuck in jobs they don't like, with little motivation to continue), which did little to encourage people to attend, and was difficult to shake off in further attempts to promote the programme.

Content

The initial proposal was ambitious, and placed high expectations on the participants and their employers. We expected participants to attend a regional residential and follow up workshops, and identify and engage in an action research project with young people, which would be written up and published in a 'Youth Work Works' booklet. This level of commitment was unrealistic, given the pressures of working with young people in an ever changing environment, and contributed to preventing people from putting themselves forward.

In planning the programme, we started working with a consultant who we asked to facilitate the residential element. She was an enthusiastic advocate of coaching as a tool for motivating staff, and we included coaching as a key feature of the residential. Feedback suggests that this was another factor that made potential participants stay away, as 'coaching' is not well understood amongst youth workers, and is seen as 'being told what to do'. On reflection, it is apparent that we were over ambitious in our aspirations for the project.

Geography and timing

As a regional body, we are used to running networks, seminars and conferences on a regional basis, and have consistently good feedback about our venue and staff. We assumed that those we wanted to target for this project would be enthusiastic about participating in a regional event in Taunton. This assumption proved incorrect, with potential participants pointing out that it was too far to travel, and being unwilling to commit to a residential event. It was also difficult to find a time of year at which youth workers were not already very busy with other events, which would be seen as higher priorities than this programme.

The connotations of 'older' workers

We made two attempts to promote the project as a regional event, and in both cases, the publicity flyer was criticised. In the first, we talked about the experience of 'older' workers, and many potential participants said they had assumed it meant someone else. In general, youth workers did not associate the term as applying to them, and often felt quite insulted when it was suggested that it might. In the second flyer, we used different language, but that was seen as too generic, not specifying clearly the intended target group.

This is an interesting issue for 'age' as an equalities issue. In youth work, we readily offer workshops and groups for 'young' people, Black workers, women workers, disabled workers and faith-based youth workers, without any concerns that participants will be offended at being invited. Being identified as 'older', however, is not regarded as something to celebrate, and indeed people are often threatened and upset to be described as such. Age is seen in terms of the disadvantages it brings, and as a 'problem' for employers to deal with, rather than an element of diversity to be welcomed. The introduction of age discrimination legislation during the time of the project has helped to put age on the equalities agenda, but there is clearly much work to be done if older people are to feel comfortable in openly discussing how their age impacts on their lives, their work and their overall experience.

It is possible that there is a further, sector specific factor with youth workers in considering age. Youth workers see themselves as advocates for young people, and expect to support young people in highlighting the ways that adults discriminate against them. It may be more difficult for them to embrace their own experience as older adults while supporting young people to make their case for greater recognition. This highlights the need for work on age discrimination to bring together those who campaign for young people's rights with those whose concern is the rights of older people, to identify the common ground and ensure that young and old are not set against each other.

The need for 'champions'

An important turning point for the project was the engagement of some key youth work managers as champions for the project in their organisations and areas. The initial need for some work with senior youth workers had been identified through our regional networks for youth work managers and youth work training co-ordinators. We returned to these networks for advice on how to take the project forward, after two failed attempts. Two managers in different local authorities in different parts of the region offered to host and recruit to *sub-regional action learning sets* based in their areas. As a result, we were able to run two action learning sets, one based in Bournemouth and the other in Gloucestershire. We also tried to recruit to a third group covering Devon and Cornwall, but it was clear that the lack of an identified local champion in this area had a negative impact on recruitment, and despite some interest, it was not possible to run an action learning set in that area.

Local champions helped to give the programme a more positive slant, and were able to undertake some key basic tasks: targeted recruitment and encouraging people to attend, booking suitable venues, and clearing managerial paths. Their contribution was greatly valued, and in both cases they also participated in the action learning sets.

CHAPTER 2

The Project In Action

Ultimately, the project consisted of:

- Two locally based Action Learning Sets for experienced, long serving (and by default, older) youth workers, held in Bournemouth and Gloucestershire. Each ALS met 3 times, with a final evaluation and reflection day at which they met together in Taunton. All meetings lasted for a day.
- Two half day seminars for youth work employers, held with the Regional Senior Youth Work Managers Network (November 2006) and the SW Principal Youth Officers Group (March 2007). A further feedback session with the SWPYOG is planned for October 2007, to reflect on the implications of the findings of the project for managing older youth workers.
- Project staff learned much from attending events with trans-national partners in Nantes and Prague, which informed the delivery of the project in the South West by providing materials, concepts and information.

Participants

14 colleagues participated in the Action Learning Sets, and levels of attendance were high (90%). Participants were largely male (only 2 women were members of the ALSs), and at least one participant was of BME origin. This gender mix does not reflect the overall mix in youth work: however, there is evidence (*JNC Survey, 2002*) that women are less likely than men to stay in youth work posts as they get older. This would be an interesting topic for further research, as it suggests that the experience of male and female youth workers as they get older is likely to differ. Anecdotal evidence indicates that women are more likely to leave and move into other areas of children and young people's services, with those who stay in youth work more likely to move into specialist roles such as training and curriculum development.

All participants work in Local Authority Youth Services, and have been in their current organisations for at least 5 years, and many of them for considerably longer. While their job titles, and in some cases, locations may have changed, the basic duties they perform have remained stable. Most of them could be described as 'Senior Youth Workers': professionally qualified, with responsibility for managing teams of staff and often for planning and supporting youth work across a geographical area. Some have responsibility for specific aspects of the youth work curriculum at Authority wide level (eg. worker responsible for training and staff development).

The Action Learning Set in Bournemouth consisted of staff who worked for one organisation, while the Gloucestershire group had members from 3 different Authorities. This mix did not have a significant impact on the content of the sessions, although the Bournemouth group clearly had more shared experience on which to draw.

The content of the programme

Action Learning Sets

The purpose of the Action Learning Sets was to:

- Enable participants to reflect on positive achievements and experiences in youth work and other areas of their professional and personal life
- Identify positive and negative factors in the development of professional careers
- Develop personal strategies for 'second half career planning'
- Develop peer support and challenge networks at sub-regional level.

The programme was designed to identify themes and issues drawn from personal and professional experiences, and assess whether these were common to other group members. The common experiences then formed the basis of proposals for positive and creative staff management to make effective use of the workforce's experience. During the programme, participants were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- Why is age regarded differently at work and outside of work (eg. at 55, in work you are viewed as 'over the hill', but if retired, you are viewed as young and dynamic)?
- How can they take control of their professional lives?
- How can they influence the organisational structures around them?
- What positive influences have helped them on the professional ladder of success?
- What influences have inhibited them on the professional ladder?
- What could they change themselves to make their working life more creative and fulfilling?
- What needs to change in organisations to make this happen?
- How can an organisation effectively use experience?
- Contributing to the future and the development of the Service.
- Develop coping strategies having:
 - Identified the positives.
 - Identified the negatives.
 - Identified the blocks to me and others.
- How do we deal with disasters i.e. convert them into positives?
- How do we celebrate and reward staff?

In addition, some input on the new age discrimination legislation was included in the programme for both groups. The groups were facilitated by an experienced group worker and trainer.

Participants were asked to devise a personal action plan to effect change in their personal and professional life and in the organisation in which they work. The participants developed their own personal confidential action plans to improve their own professional development and practice.

Participants enjoyed the process of the Action Learning Sets, and a good deal of learning arose from the groups, which is explored in the next section of the report.

Employer seminars

Two half day seminars were held for employers during the project. The first, in November 2006, before the Action Learning Sets began, used much of the basic format for the Action Learning Set first days, and asked youth work managers to identify what had acted as Stimulators and Inhibitors on their own professional ladder. Given that a significant number of those attending are in the 'older worker' category, it was not surprising to find that many of the issues they identified were repeated in the Action Learning Sets. It proved a useful way to raise issues of age, which, as noted earlier, are not currently given high priority within youth work organisations.

A second seminar was held in March 2007, at which many of the organisational issues identified by participants in the Action Learning Sets were fed back. Many managers recognised that they were affected by the same issues, pointing to cultures and practices beginning higher up the internal organisational structure and within government policy on Children and Young People which have a negative impact on older, experienced workers.

A final briefing and report will be made to the South West Principal Youth Officers Group in October 2007.

CHAPTER 3

Observations and Experiences

From all the discussions and debates there appeared to be four underlying themes: structural and policy context for the Youth Service; participants' experience of management; experience in the workplace; and issues in participants' personal lives. In some cases, issues raised could fall into more than one of these categories.

One key element was clear throughout all the discussions - all the participants were still enthusiastic, committed youth workers, motivated by working for and with young people.

Structural and Policy Context for the Youth Service

"The issue is not about age. It is about valuing staff and recognising and utilising their skills and talents." Participants.

The main concerns of participants in relation to this issue were:

- Lack of transparency and clarity on proposed structural changes and policy direction in their organisations
- Having to manage and cope with continual politically targeted change.
- Lack of long-term organisational objectives.
- Prevalence of short term fixes
- Concerns about the role of the Youth Service in the "New Children and Young People's Services World".

One of the key overarching views that arose out the groups' discussions was a feeling of uncertainty and lack of direction in the Youth Service. This was not a negative reaction against the concept of change, but a view that the Youth Service is in the middle of a significant national realignment in an, as yet, unclear youth work field. The challenge was how individuals with a plethora of professional and life experiences can effectively exist and positively contribute to this change and realignment.

There was a feeling of continual changing expectations of the Service from Central Government, local authorities, agencies, communities and most of all young people, at a time of decreasing budgets and wider increasing demand. It is felt that there is a lack of reality between the organisation's expectations and ambitions and its ability and wherewithal to achieve them. Funding arrangements now meant that a considerable amount of time is spent chasing short term funding, which emphasised a lack of long-term objectives and planning, focusing on short term fixes.

In addition, with the changes in governance at local council level, there were now fewer 'champions', with influence and power to advocate on behalf of the Youth Service. As a result participants felt that youth work, for which they felt passionately, could be marginalised and under-resourced, causing instability for them and for young people.

It was also felt that the whole process of change was not being managed as effectively as it could be, possibly because those people responsible for implementing the changes were themselves participants in, and affected by the organisational and structural change process.

What has this perceived view of uncertainty got to do with the question of older workers? Does it suggest that older workers are reluctant to change and wish to remain in the previous structures and ways of working? Does it mean that older workers can be inhibitors and blocks to the process of change, both at local and national level? Is there a 'cumulative effect' of living through substantial structural changes frequently over a long working life? Do older workers, with longer memories, see current change as a return to working methods that were tried and found wanting in previous eras? And does this make them less willing to embrace the rhetoric of change than younger staff?

For some individuals in the profession that could be true. Individuals could feel that this was another Government directed change, which will have a relatively short life span before the next initiative comes along: so why bother? Or some individuals could feel that it was too late for them. They are no longer an important player in the process of change, so will just sit back and ride the change process until it is time to retire.

But this group of youth workers and managers were clear that whilst recognising the current context of the work and the inherent stresses and strains, they were eager to positively address the challenge and develop personal strategies to assist them effectively implement change whilst maintaining their basic philosophy and belief in youth work, by meeting the needs of young people. They also felt it was important to encourage employers to effectively address the whole question of valuing staff and recognising and utilising their skills and talents.

Participants' Experience of Management

The key points raised under this heading were:

- Unclear management
- Too much management
- Prioritising deadlines and targets and not necessarily the needs of the young people
- Managers who do not act as 'champions' of the Service
- Managing with declining budgets
- Complex management arrangements: i.e. partnerships, themes and projects
- Stress of continually applying for short term funding to address long term issues.

In times of relative calm and stability in an organisation, there is always a need for good, clear, organised management. This is even more necessary in times of dramatic change, with its subsequent confusions. At such times workers want clarity of purpose, good communication networks and awareness and accommodation of the effects that the environment of change and uncertainty can have on staff. The term 'management' used in this project was not confined to direct service line managers and senior personnel in an organisation, but also included those people who were in some way involved in the overall decision making of the organisation including Councillors, Directors, Partner Organisations.

For staff to remain focussed and committed to the main purpose of the organisation, they need to be engaged in both the overall objectives of the organisation and the methods by which those objectives are achieved. Older and experienced staff have their personal and professional history by which they will judge and assess the changes, actions and developments taking place. They will, however, make personal assessments and decisions on their commitment to the process and the organisation, by what they see and experience and how they are treated.

Colleagues on this project felt that, overall their professional life, they had observed and experienced a mixture of good, bad and indifferent management practices. In some instances the bad and indifferent management was provided by managers, who themselves were victims of uncertainty and confusion in the organisation. Sometimes managers felt they were obliged to implement corporate systems and decisions, which inhibited or countermanded the objectives of the specific service.

Colleagues also felt that sometimes they had observed a lack of honesty and commitment in management; a temptation to spin a story of action, instead of laying out all the facts however unpalatable. Some had experienced managers who displayed a lack of leadership, commitment, and belief in the objectives of the organisation. It was observed that managers were sometimes reluctant to champion the objectives of the service and the work of staff. In other words, there was no agreed vision for the service, and no leader advocating on its behalf. Some participants perceived this lack of leadership not only at local level, but across the wider region, and nationally. Poor management and leadership resulted in loss of respect for the 'system' and a temptation to devise personal strategies which allowed a person to work but not engage.

Feelings of being undervalued and low professional self-esteem appeared high in individual professional assessments. Many colleagues felt that they had on occasions been disempowered, with their wide knowledge and experience being ignored or dismissed. For older workers, there may be a cumulative impact of being undervalued or ignored over a lengthy period, which contributes to their apparent lack of engagement with new initiatives.

The pressure of managing services in times of declining or changing budget structures is common experience to many services, businesses and organisations. Participants felt that their performance was affected by the powerlessness they felt to organise and administer the budget process and contribute dynamic ideas to the whole process.

Two key factors which kept appearing in any discussions around management and processes were concerns about inappropriate corporate structures and systems. Participants felt that they were very small parts in very large organisations and that on occasions systems and practices were put in place for the benefit of the 'Organisation' and not the specific 'Service'. This resulted in a lack of flexibility and an inability to be responsive to need and changing circumstances.

It is often difficult to distinguish the issues for older workers from issues that affect all staff. The above comments are not limited to older and experienced staff. All staff, at whatever level, can feel disengaged from an organisation if they are treated as irrelevant functionaries in the 'works'. The added disillusionment for older and experienced workers arises if this is experience is repeated time and again. In that case staff turn to their own personal internal coping strategies in order to survive. This results in disengagement from positive participation in the running of the organisation and service and a danger of growing apathy, cynicism and discontentment.

One key element, which ran throughout all the discussions on management, was the need for effective communications. When good, clear communication networks existed in an organisation, staff felt more confident and assured as to what was taking place. The news, information and/or consultation could be good, poor or bad, but staff felt informed and involved. If in addition, staff were able, in some way, to positively and constructively contribute to the debate, then self worth and personal value was felt to have increased. There was an appreciation that staff could not, and should not, be consulted at all times or on every subject as managers, at every level, are expected to take responsibility and manage.

However, it was felt that knowledge and awareness of what was taking place built commitment and involvement and could lead to increased enthusiasm. Also the mere fact of being asked ones views and opinions, based on your previous experiences and knowledge made staff feel valued and helped to build commitment and generate personal empowerment.

Experience in the Workplace

“The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side.” James Baldwin

The above quotation is a very sad and cynical one, although it incorporates some element of truth in that there is beauty and ugliness in every aspect of life. One would hope, however, that the balance tips on the positive in an individual’s professional experiences. Colleagues who took part in this project felt very positive about their work experiences and enjoyed their chosen profession. All the participants were still enthusiastic, committed youth workers, motivated by working for and with young people. Everyone felt some frustration at some time and these mainly focused on five areas:

(i) Lack of direction and leadership

As identified earlier, participants felt that the youth work profession was yet again, going through major changes and upheavals, at all levels both locally and nationally. Whilst not objecting to the principle of change, they felt that the dramatic changes that were taking place were being detrimentally affected by the lack of clear leadership and direction by those key people at elected member and senior manager level, who had the ability to make and/or influence decisions. It was felt that there were fewer champions now advocating on behalf of youth work. They also recognised the difficult pressures on senior managers to positively implement the changes when their personal futures were uncertain and at risk.

(ii) Ineffectual and self serving bureaucratic systems

Administration and Bureaucracy are two easy targets to hit out at, when one is working in a time of uncertainty and/or one is personally unsure of one's own position and status. Participants, however felt that there are a number of self serving procedures in the system which are of little or no benefit to either young people or staff, but are immensely time consuming for professional staff. Processes such as elements of HR management systems, financial management and data collection on young people's involvement were highlighted as frustrations. On closer probing it emerged that the underlying frustration was that staff rarely received feedback from the information they provided, data was not analysed or used in determining future provision, and action was not taken as a result of data collected. This issue has been highlighted in recent OFSTED reports on Youth Services, which note that Youth Services need to place more emphasis on analysing and using the data they gather (*Ofsted (2006) Enhanced Youth Service Report, Rutland & Windsor & Maidenhead*). Again, for older workers there is a cumulative impact on their morale and enthusiasm of engaging with what are seen as ineffective and ultimately pointless systems over a lengthy period.

(iii) Lack of recognition of skills and experience.

Age can bring with it both benefits and disadvantages. Sometimes people are attributed with skills, information and knowledge just because they are older workers and have been around a long time, whether they have them or not! They are also frequently viewed as 'defenders of the principles of youth work', (and therefore of the past?), again, even when they may not want to be. On the other hand, on occasions the length of service and age of an individual is viewed as a disadvantage. Individuals can be labelled as 'Luddites' and old fashioned because they question and challenge new or current practices. There is also a temptation and tendency to ignore the potential resource that older workers can bring to the service and organisation. Older workers feel that they are not valued. Several cited experiences where positive feedback is given to new and younger staff for good work, while they are simply seen as, at best, a 'safe pair of hands' and expected to just get on with their work, without any feedback or recognition from managers.

Participants were able to identify a number of ways in which their skills and experience could be better used by their organisations. These included providing mentoring for newer colleagues, trouble shooting in areas of work where they have substantial experience, and supporting newer colleagues through difficult professional situations. Opportunities such as these would send messages that they were trusted and valued by employers, while using their skills and knowledge more effectively to improve services for young people.

(iv) Limits and boundaries inhibiting opportunities to experiment test new ideas and initiatives.

Local authorities are often characterised as set in their ways and 'risk averse'. While this is in general an unfair picture, there is in the structure and nature of some organisations a reluctance to experiment and try new innovative ideas, especially if they are outside accepted norms and systems. On occasions the very systems that are set up to efficiently manage an initiative stifle creativity and experiment. The length of time and procedures required to set up initiatives can sometimes be their death knell. Participants said they would welcome the opportunity to have autonomy over areas of work and projects, to enable them to develop and test their skills in new and challenging aspects of work.

(v) Working Environment

There is a need for a creative and supportive working environment with clear and acceptable guidelines for behaviour and management approaches. Participants want to be respected and valued. Some of them were, unfortunately, able to cite examples of staff being ignored, undermined and not supported: occasions where people and ideas were arbitrarily dismissed and where an individual's authority was undermined in front of colleagues and staff they manage, with individuals not being trusted to take responsibility. A positive and creative working environment would acknowledge and celebrate the strengths and achievements of staff.

Personal Experiences

"There are times when I look over the various parts of my character with perplexity. I recognise that I am made up of several persons and that the person that at the moment has the upper hand will inevitably give place to another. But which is the real one? All of them or none?" Somerset Maugham 1896.

As the above quotation shows, we are different individuals at different times, in different places, interacting with different people, to achieve different goals. Parent, child, partner, carer, sibling, employee, manager, colleague, friend, acquaintance and customer - all are roles that participants recognised that they may play at sometime during a day or given period of time. And with these roles comes a varying degree of responsibility, concerns and reactions, which themselves will have an influential effect on one's ability to do one's job.

Increased caring responsibilities and concern about financial security

The responsibilities of being a parent or carer were recognised without debate, but as participants got older, the question of looking after aging parents was added to the equation with its rewards, challenges and commitments. Added to these, colleagues identified that the challenges of financial responsibilities were a priority with mortgages, secure pensions, long term health care, children in higher education etc featuring strongly. It was felt that with age, some these individual issues became a higher priority.

Physical and emotional health

Good health plays an important part in an individual's ability to live a full and active life. The physical effects of aging were recognised as important factors in an individual's work performance. Am I still fit enough to do the job? Do I still want to work long anti social hours in face to face situations with challenging young people? How is a person viewed if they make a declaration on their own physical, emotional and/or psychological abilities? Are they viewed as inadequate or a realist in assessing their own personal abilities? Are they viewed as weak in asking for advice or help? And if, unfortunately, someone is taken 'ill' how is that person viewed by colleagues, managers and the organisation?

Disability brought on by age, the results of earlier work practices or indeed a life long disability can all have a disempowering effect on an individual's work performance as one got older. This provides challenges and difficulties for the employer as well as the employee.

Interplay between work experiences and wider activities

In all, one's personal life outside of work can make a great impact on one's work life. Outside interests can stimulate and redirect one's attention and goals. Some participants found that they had developed knowledge and skills in other areas of their lives that could be used in the workplace, perhaps by working with young people on the same issues, and providing workers with new challenges. Some participants felt that they enjoyed maintaining a distance between what they did at work and their own leisure time pursuits.

New challenges and opportunities

In general, however, participants emphasised that they were looking for new challenges at work, rather than being accommodated and sidelined. They saw the benefits of aging as providing experience, insight and knowledge which is not effectively and efficiently used by their organisation. Participants highlighted that they are looking for opportunities to positively contribute to the aims of the organisation. They were looking to work in an atmosphere where they are supported to take initiatives and where opportunities are provided to make or effect real change.

“Are we still motivated to do the job? Yes. We still get a buzz from working with and for young people. It is more than just a salary.” (Participants)

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

“With vision and a mission, leaders establish unity of purpose and direction. Create an environment conducive to employee involvement in achieving the goals of the organisation.” Systems Quality Consulting

The starting point for this project was an assumption that older workers can be or indeed are “inhibitors and blocks to change”. The participants on this particular project, however, contradicted this assumption. They were enthusiastic, committed youth workers and managers who still gained considerable job satisfaction from working with and for young people.

They did, however, recognise the effects that aging could have on their individual work performances as well as how they are viewed by the organisation and services. They also recognised the inherent discrimination against older workers present in many organisations.

It seems that for some youth work employers, there is an unwitting bias in favour of younger staff. These staff are perceived as being more highly valued, with more time and resources devoted to their professional development, more opportunities offered for them to take on new projects and initiatives, and more feedback and support offered in their day to day work. Older workers perceive themselves as ‘left on the shelf’ and not considered for new projects or staff development opportunities. As a result, older workers are more likely to distance themselves from the organisation’s mission, create their own comfort zone in work, and thereby miss out on contributing to new developments. A downward spiral quickly takes hold, from which it is difficult for older workers to emerge and play a positive role in the organisation. The project showed, however, that even those who are regarded as disengaged, want to play a more active role, and want to be given opportunities to make a contribution and gain recognition.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the project:

- Organisations lose a considerable amount of skills, resources, positive experience, creative opportunities and networks if they undervalue and under-use their older and experienced staff
- Older workers will be most effective in organisations which develop a positive, dynamic and creative organisational culture which makes maximum use of the skills it has within its staff team by celebrating success, giving positive critical feedback and encouraging innovation

- Older workers need to take personal responsibility for their own professional image, and ensure they do not become what is criticised in others. *'Take care I don't become a miserable old git' (Participant).*

Recommendations

For the Regional Youth Work Unit

(i) Disseminate the learning from the project

The Regional Youth Work Unit should make sure that the findings of the project are disseminated to youth work and Children's Services employers in the region and beyond, to ensure that the lessons learned can be put into practice as workforce development strategies are put in place for the sector.

(ii) Replicate the Action Learning Sets in other geographical areas

Given that we have an older than average workforce across the whole South West, the Regional Youth Work Unit should develop a package which could be delivered in other local authorities and third sector providers, to help to identify action points and issues within organisations. There was evidence that several participants felt revitalised by being part of a process that explored issues that affected their working lives, and there would be value in repeating this elsewhere.

For Employers

"The Management and employees are the essence of any organisation. For every involved employee abilities become resources. Being involved, feeling needed, being trusted and depended upon are all motivating factors." Systems Quality Consultants

Organisations need to consider how they treat their staff, regardless of age and experience, in order to maximise their most valuable resources. The process starts at the initial interview and continues with appropriate professional investment throughout the whole employment. Some of the recommendations here are specifically age related, while others point to more general good practice in managing people. Participants identified eight areas for potential development:

(i) Valuing Staff

Create productive working environments where all staff are respected and their individual contributions welcomed and valued and where an individuals' skills and talents are matched, as much as is possible, to the objectives and specific tasks of the organisation. Success, effort, innovation and hard work should be recognised and celebrated and a 'can do' approach is created around the work with positive leadership and advocacy for the service.

(ii) Make organisational space for creative work with young people

Managers should seek to create an atmosphere of calm and stability, even during times of considerable change and upheaval by keeping staff informed and clearly indicating the purpose and direction of the service and organisation. Creating a work climate of fairness, consistency, transparency, equality and opportunity will help to achieve this.

(iii) Effective use of staff skills

Employers should carry out an audit of the professional and where agreed, personal skills of all staff in order to maximise the use of the talents available to the organisation and the potential job satisfaction for individual members of staff. A data base should be created, of ALL staff skills both personal and professional in order to maximise an individual's contributions to the overall project. Identified skills can be matched to the tasks that are required to be done and develop projects or initiatives which can be led by experienced staff.

Employers should consider appointing staff to a generic grade level in the organisation rather than a specific post. This will enable the organisation and staff will be able to respond more flexibly to changes in demand and need and there would be less need for the major organisational and structural changes that seem to occur on a regular basis, and cause huge disruption and anxiety to staff. It would create a more responsive atmosphere in the organisation set against the needs and objectives of the service and the skills available in the staff team.

Managers should recognise, value and utilise the many different types and styles of workers within an organisation - innovators, maintainers, facilitators, administrators, etc. Youth work organisations often value innovation above other roles, leaving those older staff who play important roles in maintaining the work through formal and informal support to others, sharing knowledge of the field and the area etc feeling that their skills are not valued.

A considerable amount of professional and personal skills and knowledge are locked up in an individual member of staff. The majority of this experience and knowledge currently is only available, at most to their employing organisation, and more than likely only accessed in their own immediate work environment. Using the results of the aforementioned audit organisations should develop a skills bank open to access to the complete organisation, the surrounding area and even the region.

The development of Integrated Youth Support and Development Frameworks provides an opportunity to be creative in making positive use of the skills and experiences available across the new structures. Older staff can play valuable roles as mentors, partners in training new staff, 'befriending' when a member of staff is in difficulty and non managerial supervision. This could be a resource available not only within

organisations but, using the Regional Youth Work Unit, across the Region on a reciprocal basis.

(iv) Innovative use of older staff

Organisations should consider different and innovative ways of using their older and more experienced staff, who could use their experience and knowledge of the field and the organisation to lead on short term projects. These could include research and enquiry into development of new initiatives or effective systems, or working with partner organisations on mapping services and determining needs in localities.

Effective use could be made of sabbaticals or secondments. Managers should think creatively about the best use of staff expertise to meet the challenges of the organisation, and avoid being limited by the structures of organisations and traditional roles and ways of working. Opportunities for experienced staff to work in partner organisations, agencies and authorities on specific issues could be explored.

(v) Continuous training

Training and staff development should be accessible to all and not limited to new, staff, younger staff and the introduction of new systems. Indeed workforce development should acknowledge the need for age related training.

Employers should develop the concept of 'kickstart' or motivational training for those staff of any age who find themselves in need of a professional restart. The idea of '*Second half career planning*' was warmly received by project participants.

Staff should be encouraged through managerial supervision, to engage with project opportunities, sharing knowledge and experiences and gaining new knowledge, skills and experiences to adapt to changing circumstances. Staff should be positively encouraged to identify what they continue to have to offer the service.

Many older workers have not undertaken any formal qualifications for many years. Opportunities to gain academic and vocational accreditation for in-service training and for experiential learning should be sought, in order to encourage older staff to develop their learning and renew confidence.

(vi) Clear Communication Systems

Ignorance breeds rumour, concern, resentment and in time apathy. People without information do not feel that they can play an active part of the organisation, as they feel that they are powerless and not valued in the organisation. Managers should keep people regularly informed of what is or is not taking place, including, if necessary, advising staff that confidential discussions are taking place the details of which cannot as yet be disclosed, but will be as soon as possible. People may not like what they are told but they are far more resentful of being kept in the dark and in ignorance.

Processes for consultation with staff should be agreed, and adhered to. Boundaries of the consultation should be clarified, feedback given on contributions, and practical suggestions and good ideas should be rewarded. This will help to create a culture in which staff feel that their opinions and professional judgement are valued.

(vii) Personalised work pattern and times

Older workers find their caring commitments, energy levels and financial requirements change as they get older. Employers should offer flexible working for all, with opportunities to job share or work part-time, or work their hours flexibly, matching the work patterns of staff with the specific needs of the job. Youth workers are accustomed to having considerable autonomy over their working hours, which include a lot of 'unsocial hours' in the evenings and weekends. It is important that these working patterns are recognised when managers timetable internal and partnership meetings. Managers should consider working with individual older members of staff to agree a personal work time programme.

(viii) Preparation for Retirement

Project participants felt that more could be done to help older workers plan and prepare for their retirement from work. While much organisational time and resources are focused on induction and support for new staff, little consideration is given to the consequences for the organisation, or the individual, when an experienced worker leaves. Again, this contributes to the feeling amongst older workers of being undervalued by their organisation. Several participants talked of the process of retirement as a 'danger sport' with individuals working at full pace right up to the point of departure.

Employers should consider devising a retirement preparation scheme which addresses the changing personal circumstances of individuals both physical and emotional, and identifies the skills that will be lost to the organisation when the older worker goes. Finding ways of enabling older staff to share their skills, both in the lead up to retirement, and in the months/years afterwards, will help them to feel valued, and help the organisation by ensuring that important skills are not lost, and time is not wasted in having to reinvent the wheel. Retirement preparation programmes could also encourage individuals to prepare for a third age career.

An effective retirement preparation programme, taking on board the suggestions of different work patterns and better use of skills, talents and experiences would not only personally benefit the individual, but would maintain the effectiveness of the member of staff and in so doing be of benefit to the organisation. Staff could be invited to devise a personal retirement plan, beginning 2 years prior to their planned retirement date. Other professions and fields have better track records in this area, and youth services could learn from the pre-retirement processes in place in the armed forces and the police.

By working together, youth work employers could identify potential opportunities to use the skills of experienced workers post-retirement locally, sub-regionally and regionally, and create a network and database of skills of experienced personnel.

For Older Workers

Participants recognised that older workers need to take responsibility for their own professional image. They need to reflect on their own experience of aging, and recognise the physical and emotional aspects as they affect them. They need to be on guard against cynicism and disillusionment brought on by the cumulative impact of work-related frustrations, and avoid falling into the 'grumpy' trap.

They should continue to develop and enact personal action plans:

- What can I change and how?
- What can I influence and how?
- What am I obliged to accept and note and for how long?

A work/life balance is essential, to ensure that there are other things they enjoy in their lives, to balance frustrations they experience at work.

They should continue to offer their support, skills and experience to take forward the work of their organisation, beyond their immediate 'comfort zone'. This could include involvement in mentoring, trouble shooting, short term secondments and workforce development.

Finally, they should hold on to their original purpose for taking up this career, which for most was the desire to work for and with young people in creative and challenging settings.

As a profession, youth work has been slow to acknowledge the impact of the other end of the age spectrum, and may have been doing its experienced workforce a disservice in the process. We all know that Every Child Matters, and Youth Matters: we also need to remember that:

Every Youth Worker Matters

Observations and Experiences (transcripts from the Action Learning Sets)

Overall Context

- *Lack of transparency in terms of the reality within an organisation*
- *Having to manage and cope with continual politically targeted change*
- *Government target about engaging with a community, when the community needs education*
- *Outside and uncontrollable influences*
- *Uncertainty – where the Youth Service is going to fit within the New Children's Services. Role of the Youth Service in the "New Children and Young Peoples World"*
- *Constant change: changing expectations of what youth work is/should be*
- *Managing the organisation's expectations against reality*
- *How do we balance the organisations expectations with the reality? Eg. training of part time staff. Is it relevant for all staff? Bearing in mind can they do the job?*
- *Lack of long-term objectives*
- *Short term fixes*
- *Fewer Champions of the Service*
- *Process of change being managed badly*

Management

- *Unclear Management*
- *Bad Management:*
 - *not an advocate of the Service*
 - *incompetence without sanction*
 - *lack of leadership*
 - *bullying*
 - *power/loss of control*
- *Too much Management*
- *Lack of honesty*
- *Observe poor management ® loss of respect for structure*
- *"You're not good enough"*
- *Discrimination*
- *Corporate rubbish:*
 - *being part of a machine, not a flexible service provider*
 - *systems and targets – paper trailing for who's reason?*
 - *ticking boxes*
 - *not learning from the experience of those who do it*
 - *lack of ownership*
 - *lack of understanding and empathy*
- *Poor communication*

- *'Trivial' things becoming major* - *Use of Mobile*
- *IT support*
- *Having 'the system' knocking the creativity out of staff*
- *HQ or Central Services imposing requests and systems for irrelevant information, surveys, etc*
- *Coping with vacancies and vacancy management*
- *Working to deadlines and targets and not necessarily the needs of the young people*
- *Managing with declining budgets. Expected to do more with less money*
- *Managing budgets in different ways ie. partnerships, themes and projects*
- *Managing the system of continually applying for short term funding to address long term issues.*

Professional Issues

- *Lack of recognition of experience and skills*
- *Being seen as a 'defender of the faith' (knowledgeable and experienced) by new staff.*
- *Seeing myself as the 'defender of the faith'.*
- *Being seen as a 'Luddite' if asking questions or making challenges.*
- *Be given the opportunity to experiment.*
- *Be given authority - be trusted to take responsibility.*
- *"You're not good enough".*
- *Discrimination*
- *"Service/s lacking in support"*
- *"The working environment"*

Personal Issues

- *Personal responsibilities - dependants, mortgage, pension, family, parents, carers.*
- *Outside interests and life.*
- *Health and physical abilities.*
- *Looking for new challenges and opportunities.*
- *Lack of mentoring*
- *Lack of support*
- *Lone working*
- *Abuse from young people*
- *"Feeling inadequate" – Concerned about being perceived as inadequate*
- *Stigma of stress related time off.*
- *Do not want to be seen as weak*
- *An atmosphere of not being able to effect real change.*
- *How ones own personal life can impact on ones work/adjusting/re-thinking.*
- *Personal disability* - *difficult for the individual*
- *difficult for the organisation*

Personal Strategies

- *Keep current and up to date*
- *Keep on Agenda*
- *Need to keep on various officers and councillors agendas*
- *Maintain fun in the job*
- *Accept that there is no need to rise the promotion ladder in order to gain personal satisfaction*
- *Get professional health checks – professional, physical, emotional, and psychological*
- *Go and do something completely different*
- *Develop outside interests*
- *Develop individual plans for personal well being, ie. not just coping.*

DO'S AND DON'TS

Personal/Professional Don'ts

- *Act in a way to others which you object to be treated yourself*
- *Overwork*
- *Lie or talk too much*
- *Raise impossible expectations*
- *Necessarily believe everything that is written down*
- *Inhibit another person's space*
- *Spin against colleagues*
- *Justify what you don't believe in*
- *Be afraid to acknowledge failure*
- *Keep staff in the dark*
- *Let staff think they have a say in something when they really don't*
- *Don't be inconsistent*
- *Don't refer to the "Good Old days"*
- *Conceive of a structure leaving people with the same role throughout their professional life*
- *Presume competence through age*
- *Write off people - leave them out of the information loop, etc,*

Personal/Professional Do's

- *Make sure that there is adequate resources*
- *Make sure that skills match up with tasks. Carry out a skills audit*
- *Good strategic planning*
- *Generate a clear and positive working environment*

- *Celebrate success*
- *Value the experiences of staff*
- *Ensure that credit is given where it is due.*
- *Acknowledge the success of individuals*
- *Acknowledge the efforts involved in carrying out major projects*
- *Give everyday positive feedback*
- *Give positive criticism*
- *Integrated/joined up approach to the work*
- *Creativity and Diversity in relation to age and experience*
- *Treat others like you wish to be treated yourself*
- *Give people opportunities to develop themes*
- *Share experience, knowledge and skills with other authorities*
- *Be ambitious for young people within Service Business Plans*
- *Regular Professional Health Check - physical abs well as professional*
- *Every Youth Worker matters*
- *Objectives—energising, rewarding, Vitalising, Thriving*
- *Service focus on young people rather than justifying the service*
- *Design a 3 year cycle of professional revitalisation*
- *Offer older staff the time and resources to explore options to broaden horizons and opportunities as part of staff development*
- *Adapt to changing circumstances*

PERSONAL ACTION PLAN PRO-FORMA

Identifying Personal Issues and Personal Scenarios		
Question	Personal	Structural
What can I change and how?		
What can I influence and how?		
What do I note? And for how long?		

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