Working in a multidisciplinary team: The collaborative approach?

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Kathy has worked for the past 18 months as a member of the Auckland City Family Safety Team as a child advocate, seconded from Child Youth and Family. Kathy began her social work career with the Social Welfare Department in 1976 before moving to England where she again worked in statutory social work whilst she gained her social work qualification. Since that time she has worked in a variety of non governmental social work and counselling settings before coming full circle and returning to Child Youth and Family employment.

More than ever there is an expectation that Child Youth and Family (CYF) will work in partnership with other agencies since new agreements, particularly with the police, and the introduction of the Differential Response (D.R.) with its community partners, have been introduced. This means that CYF must learn to conduct business in a different way.

A partnership can be described as:

…a cross-sector collaboration in which organisations work together in a transparent, equitable and mutually beneficial way. The partners agree to commit resources, share the risks as well as the benefits to work together towards a sustainable development goal (ThePartneringInitiative.Jan2005).

It is my contention that the essential component of successful interagency collaboration is built upon the understanding, trust and rapport which must be developed amongst the agencies.

This is further defined by the High Needs And Complex Needs Unit 2007 in their document *Better at Working Together: Interagency Collaboration*. A common focus or vision is well recognised in literature as a key success factor for collaboration. A study from the US reported that the best predictor of perceived effectiveness of collaborative relationships was found to be consensus, which was the extent to which coalition members agreed on needs, problems, solutions and methods. Other research suggests there should be agreement or clarity on aims, levels of involvement and commitment and strategy. A lead agency should also be identified, and roles and responsibilities should be determined.

Interagency teams

Child Youth and Family are currently partners in a joint initiative with police and community non government organisations (NGOs) agencies, known as Family Safety Teams. There are seven of these teams operating in New Zealand. Family Safety Teams aim to provide a more integrated approach to family violence in an effort to close the gaps identified in response to violent family situations.

The police-led teams consist of police investigators, adult advocates seconded from community NGOs, and child advocates who are seconded from both NGOs and CYF.

The computer data banks of each contributing organisation are available on site with the expectation that this enhanced ability to share information will lead to a well informed, coordinated, comprehensive intervention.

The concept of a multidisciplinary team working cohesively together is open to individual interpretation as to whether it has been achieved or not. For some the sense of collaboration may have been achieved, whilst for others 'parallel work with a minimum of conflict' would better describe the process.

Building a common foundation

The interpretation of success of such teams may well rest upon the expectation each discipline has at the outset of such a project as to how the initiative should proceed, rather than a shared explicit concept which integrates the best of the disciplines involved.

Mullaly comments:

> Social work literature provides useful directions for working for broader transformations including an analysis of power relations, strategies for building coalitions with others who are working toward similar ends, process issues associated with change and strategies for addressing systemic constraints (Mullaly, 2002).

Since such initiatives are usually negotiated and signed off at management level the contents of those discussions are rarely available to the employees who subsequently take up the appointments.

I would suggest that when interagency teams are brought together under a new initiative, it is imperative that training should be provided to all team members on the model of practice observed by each of the disciplines involved. This would provide a better framework of understanding as to what might be propelling a particular approach or attitude to a piece of work.

Such training should also incorporate strategic planning around the new initiative so the expected outcomes are clear to all participants and they can all play a part in mapping the pathway to achieve those outcomes.

Such strategic planning should also address the specific needs of each worker both in regard to the requirements of their parent organisation as well as those of the new initiative For example, social service organisations have an expectation around internal/external supervision, as well as ongoing training within their parent organisation. Whilst police also have an expectation around training needs for their staff, their expectation of what constitutes 'supervision' is radically different. It is important everyone has a clear understanding of how the practicalities are to proceed and the appropriate infrastructure is set in place to support these expectations.

Workers from different disciplines often bring with them their own set of prejudices in regard to their new partners and their organisations. The opportunity for breaking down such prejudices and preconceived ideas is best met when all team members share the same room, or at least the same part of a building, as substantial headway can be achieved through

the informal conversations which take place, as well as observing other team members carrying out their daily tasks. This exposure also allows team members to learn the language of their fellow agencies.

I would also argue strongly against team members being required to carry a workload or further responsibilities at another site as this compromises their ability to fully integrate in their multidisciplinary team. It also conveys the unspoken message that the work which takes them away from the team effort is afforded a greater priority.

The case for an independent manager

A clear pathway for open communication reduces the likelihood of frustrations building and relationships deteriorating within a multidisciplinary team. In turn this can only ensure a better outcome for the client/victim if the response of the team is focused on their needs without the distraction of internal issues.

Every team operates upon a power dynamic. When an interagency team is assembled, that dynamic becomes distorted if one of the member teams holds a leadership or supervisory role. This leadership role tends to operate according to the model which is most familiar to the supervisor. So, for example, a supervisor from the police will undertake this duty in a far different manner to that of a supervisor from a social services agency. The bias of the supervisor will heavily influence the way in which the team will operate.

It can be no surprise that a police-led team, based in a police station will operate according to the police model rather than a model which equally reflects the participating agencies.

The police force is a hierarchical organisation which relies on directives rather than case discussions, briefings rather than team meetings. It is this hierarchical structure which obviates an inclusive approach which is more familiar to social service agencies.

It is my belief that any interagency collaboration should be led by an independent manager to avoid the domination of any one partner, thus setting the scene for a more collegial, integrated approach. I would further argue that team members who hail from a social service/NGO background have a greater appreciation of the importance of team dynamics and the need for a consultative, inclusive approach whilst this different method of operating is something the police members of the team have to learn.

An independent manager is better placed to introduce systems and processes and protocols which embrace the best of what each agency has to offer. A reluctance to engage in a different process is not always a result of short-sightedness or indifference by workers of a particular organisation but rather a lack of education and awareness of an alternative. 'We don't know what we don't know.'

Team appointments

The selection of a new team member (particularly in smaller teams) impacts significantly on those already in place. I have observed quite different processes occur when members for the different agencies have needed to be selected. One NGO approach involved the prospective

candidate visiting the site, meeting with the team and participating in a general discussion about the nature of the work with the team. Feedback to the selectors was encouraged. Another partner agency presented a new appointment as a fait accompli.

The police process attended to police matters such as competency modules and when a meeting took place after the selection interview, the candidate indicated she was unaware of the team composition.

I would suggest that participating agencies must also consider the dynamics of the composite team as well as their own agency requirements.

Operational differences

Operational differences need to be articulated and discussed so every team member has a clear understanding of how their style needs to change in order for matters to proceed in a truly collaborative manner. For example, the police tend to be outcome focused with little attention being spent on the process involved in achieving that outcome. The information tends to be disseminated through a briefing style, on a need-to-know basis, with a clear plan of action communicated down through the superior officer.

A social service/ NGO approach would prefer the case to be brought to the team for discussion and a resolution reached about the most appropriate form of intervention. All team members would be expected to contribute equally to this process and a consensus reached. In this instance experience and insights are given more weight than seniority or rank.

This recognition of the differing models of practice is essential for team members as such awareness assists in more readily identifying the source of daily frustrations and thus enhancing the opportunity to resolve them, minimising conflict and resentment.

Any worker planning to participate in a multidisciplinary team should have the ability to recognise these inevitable daily frustrations as a natural tension borne out of trying to learn the language of their partnering agencies as well as the effort to meld different methods of practice into one cohesive tool, predicated upon the best outcome for the victim/client.

In the current climate of greater information sharing and a collaborative approach, greater consideration needs to be given to the processes involved in identifying the best agency representative rather than simply filling a vacancy. A prospective candidate needs to be someone who appreciates the complex and often unspoken dynamics of such an approach. Thus patience, tolerance, analytical skills and an ability to cope with frustration are essential ingredients for an interagency worker.

Such attributes would enhance the ability to address old prejudices and, hopefully, dispel them. For example, mention supervision to a police officer and, anecdotally, this conjures up images of 'touchy feely, bleeding hearts, blood all over the carpet'. A simple explanation of what supervision actually entails addresses this misnomer. Conversely social service employees often report a perspective of police officers as having a rigid insensitive approach which is entirely centred on nailing 'the bad guys'.

Informal dialogue which takes place within the team can go a long way to dispelling these myths.

A good manager can create the appropriate atmosphere and ensure a suitable forum is available to promote good dialogue and exchange of ideas. This is essential if misconceptions and prejudices are to be overcome and lead the way to an integrated approach to the work at hand.

Client work

Such an integrated model of practice has the potential to become a very effective intervention, because when it works, it works well. An orchestrated piece of work can be carried out in the best interests of the client. A recent case example of this was where a woman was unable to escape her abusive partner since he monitored her every move. One team member was surreptitiously able to make contact with the woman whilst she was at court where her partner was appearing for assaulting her. The woman indicated her desire to take herself and her children to a place of safety. A plan was devised whereby the police would apprehend her partner for a breach of bail (a common occurrence by the offender) which would provide a small window of opportunity for the woman and children to be safely uplifted and transported to a secret location. A great deal of planning and coordination was required before the plan was executed.

This operation required clear communication within the team so every member was clear about their role. The desired outcome was effected and the woman and children were able to begin a new life. When all the components of an integrated approach are working smoothly, the collaborative model is highly effective.

Interagency meetings

Interagency meetings for high risk cases are becoming more frequent as the obstacle of information sharing is overcome. By using the best information of combined data bases, agencies are able to make better informed, considered interventions, often in concert with other community agencies. This lessens the possibility of families, particularly transient families, slipping through the gaps, as well as a more holistic delivery of service to families.

Summary

If these initiatives are the way forward then consideration must be given to ensure they are built upon a strong foundation of clear communication, trust and rapport, where each discipline is seen as having an equal contribution to make. Time should be taken in preparing and establishing such teams to ensure the frontline workers are conversant with the practice and processes of their fellow team members. It is essential that good external supervision and supports are in place to provide a constructive forum for airing the frustrations which inevitably occur whilst working in a multidisciplinary team. It is all too easy for the parent organisation of the seconded worker to absolve itself of the overall responsibility for ongoing support.

Consideration should be given to ensuring that the potential for career progression is built into the position. Each partner agency must be responsible for maintaining strong links with their team representative to ensure they receive not only the best support possible but also an ongoing training programme which will assist their worker to remain abreast of their agency developments. It is all too easy for the worker to fall through the gap between their own agency and their new team, where neither manager provides adequate support.

When these considerations are attended to interagency teams provide a comprehensive and holistic intervention.

References

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