

WORK SHOULDN'T HURT SOCIAL ACTION IN PRACTICE

Liz Harris, November, 2000.

The following is an account of my journey through a social action campaign to eliminate bullying in the workplace from a very personal experience. This is one of those journey's where I wouldn't mind reaching the destination.

HOW I GOT INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT

FOB (New Zealand slang for being fresh of the boat here in Australia) I commenced working in parent education for a large non-government organisation in Melbourne in August 1997. It did not take me long to find out that there had been (loosely defined) management 'problems' for some time. Nevertheless, our newly formed team, making the best of opportunities before us, ploughed on.

For as long as I can recall, there have been numerous management problems in the organisation I work for. A lot of staff felt that it had tried to grow too big, too fast, without any clear direction. It seemed to the lay person to be functioning on management by crisis. I am not meaning to trivialise how challenging it can be for an organisation to amalgamate. What I do challenge are the 'way' decisions, communication, policy and guideline setting are carried out.

At a local level, I am proud to say that our small team built and maintained our service, even though it was part of a Federal initiative, it was also very much a part of me.

How did I feel that I had ownership in the work I did, even though I did not feel ownership in the organisation? Simple – best practice standards and good management practice from our Service Co-ordinator, and also at a collegial level.

What Worked Well

I will only give a point description here, for the purposes of this exercise.

Regional Parenting Resource Service Team membership: 6

- Vision – set by all
- Planning – quality time spent together planning our goals for 6 months to 1 year. We also undertake monthly plans and term plans as we work around the school term year.

- Ideology – set by all. Who we are, what we value, beliefs around the work we do, how we want to do our work, and what areas of work practice interest us.
- Policies and Procedures – set by all. Agreed by all. Maintained by all and amended as required by all.
- Supervision – excellent collegial and work place supervision – for all, by all.

Do you see a pattern? It didn't really matter to me that I may have felt overworked and underpaid, under resourced and under trained – what made the difference was that I had an active say in everything that impacted on my world at work.

Of course, we also addressed the issues above as they were an intrinsic make up of the organisation at large and the usual sorts of pressures placed on agencies that compete for government funding. I am aware that as the government continue to under fund and under resource the community sector, workers in that field will continue to have structural difficulties balancing what is expected by others (the organisation and the government) against what is realistically achievable.

What Changed?

My first experience with understanding what the newly amalgamated organisation I worked for had by way of a 'Vision', was when the CEO organised a meeting for staff to attend, where he presented the vision and we were to all clap and think it was brilliant somehow. I did not feel that I belonged to it in anyway. From a historical perspective as an indigenous New Zealander, it was just another 'white bloke' telling me what to believe in.

Throughout the changes, throughout incompetent management and in my words from my world – the organisation itself just did not 'Walk The Talk' (see comment on how the Vision was shared). I understood the nature of what entity I worked for and guess I was a little naive in my assumption that somehow I would be treasured and nurtured as an integral part of their 'family'. The respect and good practice came to me from a grass roots level only. Head Office was this big thing, somewhere out there that did its stuff and come to think of it – I didn't really know what they were there for exactly. I became disillusioned, disheartened and extremely disappointed. I felt unsafe and started to consider things that could be done to help make the organisation a healthier place to work. I started speaking up and reaching out.

Other 'Stuff'

Other colleagues (for a seriously long time) had been experiencing similar dissonance as well as some other very serious problems. When you read the information on workplace bullying and organisational abuse – you may come to understand more about how we came to this place. Grievances, the

mishandling of complaints/grievances, inappropriate and inadequate supervision, mistrust, lack of clarity with regards to organisational changes and finances, lack of information, even misinformation and so on. The list goes on forever. Needless to say, we are now at a point where the complexity of it all is challenging to say the least.

Colleagues

Thank God for Brave Hearts is all I have to say about colleagues. Through the pain, grief, abuse, humiliation, shame, anger, frustration, tears and hysterical laughter, they are the Salt of the Earth. I would be long gone without them.

What a contradiction – the people most valuable to me are the ones least valuable to management. I will have to sit and figure that one out in my head one day, as to how that works.

What is magical about 'others' is that we are all putting our gifts into the basket and collaborating to achieve a healthy and safe work environment. What humbles me, is that they're not just doing it for themselves. Hardly a meeting goes by when someone doesn't mention other regions wondering how things are going for them, and if our social action can be of assistance for them. No we're not martyrs, just fighters.

My World

Why do I care so much when friends say, just leave?

Whakawhanaungatanga. 'The act of bringing people into your family'. Note (whaka) pron. far car represents action.. doing, so it's not just talking about it. The truest definition in any language is not what you say, but rather what you do). The closest English definition could loosely be called 'the extended family'. Some cultures see family in a linear way, In Maori culture it's much broader. That can easily work against us but the gifts received outnumber the gifts lost.

Abuse I have experienced or witnessed in my workplace:

- Sexual advances from two male bosses at different workplaces.
- Male worker in a family violence prevention program with a sexual abuse problem himself. (He had a sex-addiction).
- Two workers in management positions in a community agency misappropriating funds.
- Male boss screaming, spitting, jumping up and down and pointing the finger at me in a fit of rage.
- A Drug and Alcohol worker getting hits off his client.
- A Drug and Alcohol worker who was himself an alcoholic.
- Witnessing colleagues being abused by bully bosses.
- Witnessing colleagues bully other colleagues.

- Witnessing a social worker having their children removed from her.
- A social worker placing small children in a welfare home with an adolescent child sex offender.
- Three different psychologists giving three different assessments for a parent – all of them questionable and each one contradictory to the other.
- A male social worker calling me a plastic person.
- A female social worker citing in Court that it was inappropriate for me to hold a client's hand to console the client at a meeting where she was removing their children from them. To name just a few!

These noted experiences can appear to some to be a little slanderous on my part, or as emotionally-illiterate people may argue, a bit emotive and in no way represents the full picture of workers in the community sector. I have worked with and respect many, many people for the fantastic work they do and the integrity and ethical dedication they hold dear.

These points serve to highlight that the World is far from perfect and it does not matter what industry you work in, or how long you work somewhere, there will always be times where your view of how the World should be and how it really is, comes up for you.

I encourage you to remain strong in your convictions and strength of character – it is no easy task 'Walking The Talk'. Some people are merely good talkers.

Social Action

There are many workers all doing their part and there are hiccups and delays and some of us may be travelling ahead a little too fast, and that is fantastic. I have received lots of e-mails from people all over Australia and the World giving their support and in turn have been supporting others as they struggle for social justice and in some cases, pure survival. My disgust at the mistreatment and abuse of employees in the workplace motivates me and puts a fire in my belly that I reckon my ancestors must have used to keep them warm at night.

E Tu, Kia Kaha, Kia Pono.
Stand Up, Be Strong, Keep The Faith.

© Liz Harris, October, 2000

Why document this journey? So others will hear their own journeys echoed and gain strength.