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IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

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Walsh, K. Moss, C. Fitzgerald, M. (2006) Solution-focused approaches and their relevance to practice development

In my role as a nurse manager in an acute care hospital, I was invited to participate in a working group formed to develop and implement an organisational shared governance model. As part of this process I was required to critique existing governance structures within my own ward area. I thought critically about whether the existing local decision making framework engaged staff, fostered critical discussion and led to sustainable practice change. I remember feeling quite despondent and overwhelmed with the realisation of the large body of work required to implement a local governance model that achieved these aims for staff and patients.

At that time I was undertaking further study and was introduced to an article entitled, 'Solution-focused approaches and their relevance to practice development' (Walsh, K. et al., 2006). The introduction immediately caught my attention.

'Experience has shown that teams and individual practice developers can become stuck, either because the problems appear too big or they become over-reliant on practice development facilitators or leaders to identify problems, formulate plans and evaluate work.' (p 146)

I had one of those 'ah ha' moments, where my feelings and experience were mirrored by the authors' words. I realised that my leadership style and approach had contributed to my feeling stuck. Having not previously implemented a local governance structure that enabled all staff to be involved in practice change, I had potentially created an over-reliance on the key leaders in the ward area to initiate, drive and sustain change. If I was feeling overwhelmed and defeated, how were other key leaders feeling, and what impact was this having on staff and the outcomes we were trying to achieve?

Walsh et al. explore two case studies to highlight practical examples where facilitators helped practice developers to evaluate their own successes and, in doing so, found solutions for improving practice. These examples are then used to demonstrate the underlying theory of solution-focused approaches and their application in contemporary practice development. The authors provide a broad overview of the origins and theory underpinning solution-focused approaches, as listed below.

- Change discourse: focus on the strengths and what works and use this to assist change rather than focusing on problems
- Solution discourse: use of the miracle question so that a solution can be visible. This also includes follow-up questions to help goals and prioritise actions
- Strategy discourse: also involves action planning, further prioritisation of actions and refining solutions

This solution-focused theory encouraged me to think differently, not only about the challenges of improving the local governance structure, but also about the approaches I was using within that structure when working with the leadership group and staff to bring about practice change. It was one thing to acknowledge problems and issues – but how often did we as a team explore successes ‘so that strengths and skills buried within them were exposed’ (p 148) and then able to be further developed. One of the key messages that resonated with me in working together in solution-focused ways is to do more of ‘what works’ rather than focusing on problems and reactive strategies.

The authors caution that, while they believe solution-focused approaches are preferable to problem based approaches, this is only one tool and it is reliant on skilled facilitation to engage with stakeholders effectively. It is therefore crucial for the facilitator to also consider the importance of the following.

- Co-operative engagement and the facilitation of learning which encourage a positive attitude amongst staff involved in the change process
- The facilitator having some understanding of the context and the situation of the staff
- A commitment to creativity in working together and developing solutions to maximise success

Reflecting on my own experience of working in groups, the different styles, energy levels and experiences of individuals all impact on engagement. For the facilitator working with a group, this can be challenging to understand, influence and guide. The concepts presented had synergy with other work I had read on facilitation models and approaches; adopting more positive and creative approaches moving forward would not only help me but the team.

The final section of the article illustrates the importance of working with the goals of the staff, and explores the risk of using solution-focused techniques ‘on’ people rather than ‘with’ them. It also discusses the notion of transparency with the techniques and approaches used as a method of building capacity and assisting a move towards sustainable change. Focusing on existing strengths and strategies that are working highlights to individuals and teams that they are not powerless; change is possible and they have many of the skills to bring about that change. Solution-focused approaches ‘can help us understand the steps that may be the essential precursors to implementing and sustaining a large change’ (p 154). However, when working with large change projects, consideration must be given to ensuring that the sole focus of the work is not the change project itself but the essential development work required for more sustainable change. My approach in the process of implementing the shared governance model shifted to helping staff identify existing strengths and structures that were working well that we could build on, rather than thinking we had to begin all over again. As a facilitator I transparently used solution-focused approaches to build facilitation skills simultaneously with capacity in key leaders and the entire team.

Reflecting on my major influences in practice development has been a learning experience in itself – the challenge being to pinpoint one major influence. The focus of my reflection has been on solution-focused approaches and their relevance to practice development. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention the influence of inspirational individuals with whom I have worked, both

in my workplace and externally with connections made through participation in collaborative practice development activities (including the authors of the article). What is it about these colleagues that stands out? They all demonstrate practice knowledge and expertise, leadership in research, skilled facilitation and, in the ways they work with others, their espoused values are seen in every interaction. They offer a balance of challenge and support, and they are honest and generous in the sharing of their own experiences so that I, and others, can learn.

Both the article and personal reflections demonstrate the importance to me of work based learning, and learning in and from practice (Hardy et al., 2006) so that practitioners change how they and their teams work and ultimately improve the care they deliver to patients.

References

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