Chapter 8
Use of person centred thinking tools to resolve complaints

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Put simply, person centred thinking is a way of assisting people to work out what they want and the support they need, and helping them get it (*Department of Health Guidance*, 2008).

Tony's story

A father lodged a complaint about his son Tony's day service. Tony has an intellectual disability and autism. His father complained that the day service program wasn't meeting Tony's needs, because it lacked structure and routine. He complained that Tony wanted to learn how to handle money and how to read and that the service wasn't supporting Tony to develop these skills.

When Tony's father raised this with the service they explained that people using the service voted on the types of activities they wanted and that Tony enjoyed the various social and recreational activities offered. They didn't feel that Tony wanted or needed the type of program suggested by his father.

A Resolutions Officer from DSC met with Tony, his father and the service provider. The Resolutions Officer asked about Tony's support plan and whether people knew about what was important to Tony – in terms of what he enjoyed doing and what was a good day for him? How did the day service offer activities that reflected what was important to Tony, compared to the group as a whole?

Tony's father and the service provider were able to identify things that were working well for Tony in the program – his enjoyment of some of the social activities – and things that weren't – Tony became frustrated and bored with some activities. The Resolutions Officer also asked everyone to consider what was important to Tony. Tony's father put forward that Tony was often stressed and anxious about going to the day service. The service provider and Tony agreed that this could be because Tony needed more predictability and routine in his day. The service provider also learned from Tony's father that Tony had been able to count money and had learnt to read signs in his previous program. He appeared to have lost some of these skills and was now less confident when going out and shopping. Tony particularly liked going to milk bars, and being able to choose and pay for snacks. The service provider hadn't realised this and talked about how they could develop a program with a regular routine of Tony going to a nearby milk bar and working out his money to pay for snacks.

Through taking a person centred approach to the complaint, the service provider agreed to work with Tony and his father to develop a support plan that reflected a balance of what was important *to*, and important *for*, Tony in their program. The program was individualised to meet Tony's needs and goals.

Person centred thinking provides an opportunity to broaden the understanding of what quality of life means for each person and what good quality human service practice is for each individual. The particular challenges are to make this goal a reality with limited time and resources.

Success therefore requires 'new' skills and a critical look at existing roles. These 'new' skills are referred to as person centred thinking skills. 'New' does not mean these skills are not currently practised by many people, rather that they are not yet systematically taught to people in the context of their day to day work. The skills referred to are ones that will help providers to have better information on which to base their response to a complaint.

Person centred planning has now been in use for 20 years and research has found its application does make a difference to the quality of life people experience. Research from the UK found that:

> Very little change was apparent in people's lives prior to the introduction of person centred planning. After the introduction of person centred planning, significant positive changes were found in the areas of: social networks; contact with family; contact with friends; community based activities; scheduled day activities; and levels of choice.
>
> (Robertson et al, 2005)

Whilst this is significant, experience has also shown it is not the mere presence of a person centred plan that

makes the difference. The factors that make the difference include:

- the degree of learning that occurred as a result of the plan
- the commitment of people around the person to implement what is learned
- the knowledgeable support of those with power and authority.

(*Robertson et al, 2005*)

Therefore, whilst your organisation needs to ensure you have person centred plans for people using your services it is equally important that in the context of complaints your staff know how to:

- engage all of the critical people in doing this work – the person, family members, carers, significant others in the person's life, and managers
- develop person centred assessments that synthesise and organise the learning so that it describes not only what is important *to* and important *for* each person but also describes the balance between them
- listen, learn and understand what is important *to* and important *for* each person when responding to a complaint, and
- see the complaint as contributing to the ongoing learning process, rather than as a one off event.

(*Thompson, Kilbane and Sanderson, 2007*)

Other person centred thinking skills which are useful to apply to complaint resolution are available at *www.learningcommunity.us* and include:
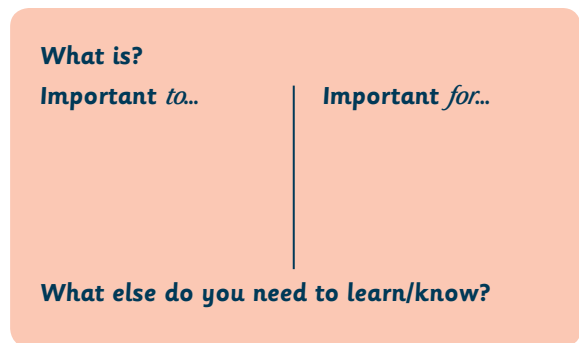
8.1. Important to and important for

What is **important** *to* a person includes only what people are expressing: with their words and with their behaviours. In situations where there is inconsistency between what people say and what they do, a person centred thinking approach relies on behaviour as being more likely to reflect what is important to a person. This is particularly the case when people are saying what they think others want to hear.

What is **important** *for* people includes only those things that we need to keep in mind for people: what others see as important in order to help the person be healthy, safe and a valued member of their community.

One way of doing this is to list those things that are **important** *to* the person in relation to the complaint on one side, and those that are **important** *for* on the other. It is then possible to compare the two columns and see how a balance between the two aspects can best be achieved in responding to the complaint. This may also cause you to identify other things that you need to know in order to be able to respond to the complaint with a clear focus on the person using the service.

Figure 3: Important to and important for list

John's story

John did not like staying at home during the day as he became easily bored, and would tend to self injure. However, his parents were worried that he might be at risk out in the community. The accommodation service provider had not prevented John from leaving the house to go for a walk, and on a couple of occasions he had been returned home by the police.

John's parents complained to the disability service that they were failing to ensure John's safety in the community. In this situation it is clearly important to John to be able to come and go freely from his home at his own choosing. It is important for John to be able to be as safe as possible in the community and not self injure, as well as being able to return home.

As a result of the complaint the provider was able work with John and his parents' concerns. They developed a strategy that would enable John to freely go out into the community and they would work with John on always taking a pack with him that had food, water and his address details, as well as a mobile phone that had programmed numbers which he could ring if he got lost. Whilst the parents were still somewhat anxious about this, it was trialled over an extended period and worked.

8.2. Mindful learning: What is working/not working?

A person centred approach encourages an exploration of **what is working** and **not working** for the person. Too often complaint resolution approaches focus exclusively on what is not working, rather than also seeking to identify what is working. What the provider is doing well from the person's perspective can provide important insights into what they may need to do more of to address the complaint.

When receiving a complaint it can be useful to consider what is working and not working for the person with a disability, the family and the service provider.

When reviewing your approach to complaints it can be useful to see what themes emerge from person centred plans and go through the following steps:

1. Decide what information is needed to help you review your approach to service delivery

2. Consider what assumptions you are making in deciding what information is needed

3. Collect the information from the plans

4. Group the information

5. Allocate the themes as a team

6. Look at the themes and consider what this tells you about what you need to do differently/better

7. Develop an action plan of what needs to be done by whom and when so that people can see the changes.

8.3. Four plus one questions

The other useful person centred tool that can be applied to managing complaints is the *four plus one questions*. These questions can be used by both the provider and the person bringing the complaint. The questions are:

1. **What have we tried?**
2. **What have we learned?**
3. **What are we pleased about?**
4. **What are we concerned about?**
+1. **What do we do next?**

As with the working/not working tool, this enables elements of current practice that are going well to be captured in seeking to resolve a complaint. This approach also offers a useful reflection on what has previously been tried and what has been learned so that the approach to resolving the complaint builds on what has been learnt in the past.

8.4 Defining roles and responsibilities – the doughnut sort

Given the history of disability service provision, where sometimes overly protective approaches were taken to supporting people with a disability, it can be useful to delineate what is the responsibility of the service provider and what is not. One way of doing this is to use the doughnut sort (see Figure 4). This approach asks:

• What are your core responsibilities?

• What are areas where you can exercise creativity and judgement?

• What is not your paid responsibility?

WE'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING INSIDE THE DOUGHNUT!

WE'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR NOTHING?

LET ME GET A JAM FILLED DOUGHNUT & SAY THAT AGAIN!

GOLDING

Peter's story

Peter is provided with in-home support following the death of both his parents. He has limited cooking skills and on two occasions the worker arrived to find the gas on after he had cooked something on the stove. They had previously tried delivered meals but he did not eat these, and they had learned that when he cooked the meal himself he tended to eat it. Peter took great satisfaction from having cooked the meal himself.

As the disability service could not provide a worker to support him in cooking each meal they decided to do a couple of things. The first was to change to an electric stove and make sure smoke detection and other fire safety equipment was installed and that Peter knew how to use it. Then they worked with Peter on a menu schedule and shopping twice a week, to see if he could follow the menu when the support worker was not there on alternate days. For the weekend he chose to eat meals from a local take away venue for which he had the numbers programmed into the phone and his favourite dishes highlighted on the menu.

If we consider the earlier example of John (p, 38), it is the core responsibility of the service provider to provide him with appropriate accommodation and support. Where they exercised creativity and judgement was in relation to how best to support him to access the community, and they developed a strategy with John to achieve this. This did not eliminate the risks involved but did mean they had taken reasonable steps to achieve this; the provider could not be responsible for his care every hour of the day, given his desire and ability to access the community independently.

This approach can also be important as service provision becomes increasingly community based, potentially blurring the responsibilities of the service provider. Working through the doughnut gives your organisation an opportunity to clarify your core responsibilities in relation to the complaint, and where it is possible to exercise judgement and creativity. It can also help clarify those areas that are not the responsibility of the provider.

Thought

Useful questions to ask:

What positive outcomes have been achieved for people with a disability as a result of making a complaint?

What would people with a disability and their families say about your complaints resolution process?

Have you ever asked them?

In summary adopting a person centred approach to managing complaints can help ensure that the needs, wishes and expectations of the person with a disability remain central to the resolution of the complaint as well as providing an opportunity to build on what is working in the provider approach to supporting the person with a disability.
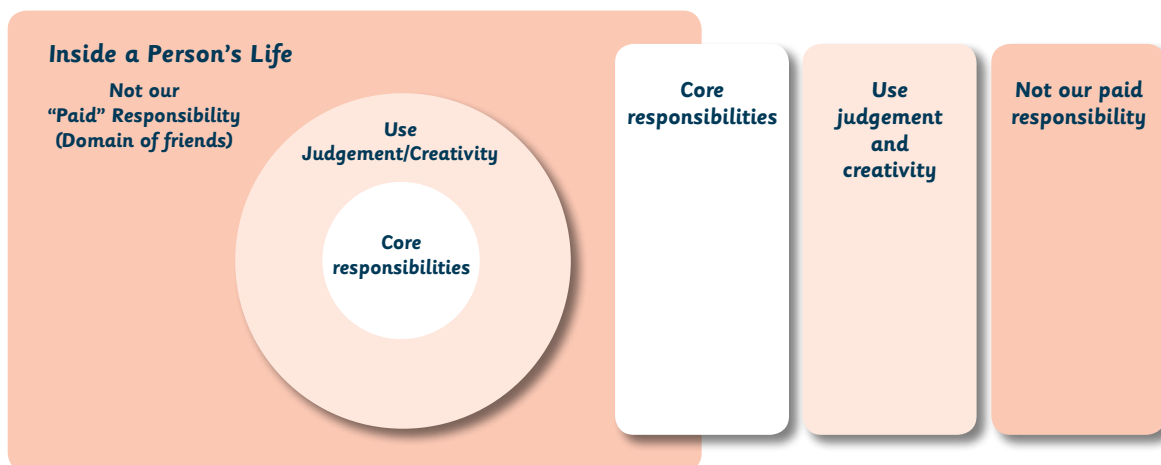
Inside a Person's Life

Not our "Paid" Responsibility (Domain of friends)

Use Judgement/Creativity

Core responsibilities

Core responsibilities

Use judgement and creativity

Not our paid responsibility

Figure 4 : Using the doughnut sort
These tools have been developed by The Learning Community for Person Centred Practices. For other person centred tools that can have useful application to complaint resolution, visit the following website: *www.learningcommunity.us.*