Chapter 3
Delivering quality human services through continuous improvement and building a learning culture

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> *One of the surest signs of a bad or declining relationship with a customer is the absence of complaints.*
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> Ted Levitt, Harvard Business Review, 1991

An effective approach to managing complaints requires an organisational culture which sees a complaint as an opportunity to improve and learn.

Michael's story

Michael lives in his own home with the support of a disability service. His mother contacted the Disability Services Commissioner concerned that she was unable to contact him and that his service provider did not appear to be responding adequately to his disappearance. Mrs Taylor advised that Michael had a history of behaviours of concern and tended to get into trouble when he was not well supported. When she contacted the service provider, she was told that his case worker had not had contact with him for several days.

When the Resolutions Officer from DSC spoke with the case worker, she advised that she was arranging a meeting with Mrs Taylor for the following day, to discuss how best to support Michael, especially when contact was not being made.

Mrs Taylor later advised the Resolutions Officer that the meeting had been very productive. Both Mrs Taylor and the case worker were unsure about how to best work with Michael but were able to share valuable information. Included in this was that Mrs Taylor advised the case worker that when Michael was hard to contact, visiting him at his house either late at night or early in the morning was the best option as he tended to be out all day and would not return phone messages. All the case workers visits to that time had been made in the early afternoon.

3.1. Culture is more than compliance

The *Disability Act* 2006 (the Act) has introduced the requirement for service providers to have appropriate systems in place to receive and resolve complaints, although having a complaints resolution process has been part of the Disability Standards Self Assessment since 1997. This compliance is about conforming to the requirements of the Act. Organisational culture, however, is a step beyond that: where complaints resolution becomes part of the organisation's way of thinking and doing (not just an action item on its 'to do' list).

Where complaints are seen as being only about compliance, rather than also about improving service quality or forming part of the shared values of your organisation, the complaints resolution process may at best not be fully supported by the culture or at worst be at odds with it.

Complaints resolution processes not only provide an effective means of dealing with complaints, they also provide an opportunity for your organisation to find out where problems may be occurring and where changes need to be made. Complaints data offers a valuable source of information as to where and how your organisation can improve service delivery. Efficiencies gained through complaint resolution processes are a major justification for setting up and maintaining such a system.

However, unless these processes are supported by a strong culture which sees complaints as an important way of receiving feedback from people using services, they tend to become simply a collection of manuals, policies and procedures which are not reflected in the practice of the organisation.

> **Tip**
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> *To help with the integration into the culture it can be helpful to develop a complaints vision. This can be something to aspire to, a mantra to motivate people and a general statement that complaints are valued.*

3.2. What is organisational culture?

Anthropologists understand culture as a set of processes which lead to outcomes and give them meaning, and the social relationships and practices in which such objects and processes are created. It is, in short, *'the way things are done around here'* (Neill and Smith, 2008: 3). *It is the collective values of a group of people, the relationships between those people, how they see the world and their own place in it* (Neill and Smith, 2008: 3).

We all create and re-create our culture every day through the words we use and the work we do, through what we find unacceptable, and what we are prepared to tolerate, what we see as worth working for, giving us meaning and purpose so that it is worth getting out of bed in the morning.

Each organisation has its own culture which reflects the things that staff, or sections of staff, commonly value, including their shared visions and beliefs and what sort of work related behaviour is considered appropriate or inappropriate. Organisational culture affects how staff relate to each other and to people using services and the everyday manner in which people work together to get things done. (Quality Framework for Disability Services in Victoria, 2007b: 1).

Culture is larger than any single organisation and belongs to all of us. Consequently we all have a role to play in applying our efforts to where it fails to meet the needs and aspirations of the people it is meant to serve.

> **Tip**
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> *Your policy and procedures will be most effective where there is a strong organisational culture where it is seen as being OK to complain.*

3.3. Quality culture

A quality culture is one where your everyday practice is reflected on, using these values, beliefs and expectations to learn from your experiences. This reflection is aided by a willingness to challenge the assumptions you make which affect your approach to service provision. From this approach you are then able to identify areas for improvement in a systematic and planned way. The presence of a quality culture is important to delivering better service outcomes to people with a disability and promoting the sustainability of the organisation.

A quality complaints culture is more than writing policy, procedures and guidelines. It is more than training your staff in complaints resolution. Complaints must become an important and valued part of everyone's job. This type of culture is the opposite to one where the organisation seeks to attribute blame for any mistakes made, which can have the effect of discouraging staff from taking calculated risks or indeed learning from their mistakes.

To create a 'complaints friendly' culture the executive leadership group need to clearly signal to staff their support of the system and take visible responsibility for outcomes. Complaints resolution should be recognised and should be an important function within the organisation; how it works should be clearly publicised and its purpose and objectives should be discussed and reinforced with staff. People are your greatest resource whether they are staff or people using services, and that people power is a key mechanism for raising awareness of your complaints approach and promoting accountability.

3.4. Person centred culture

In the context of disability services there is a gradual transition from a service led culture to one that is increasingly, although not yet consistently, person centred. Such a person centred culture has outcomes which are about more productive and meaningful lives and better connections with the community (*Neill and Smith, 2008: 3*). This more person centred culture is one where listening and learning are built into every aspect of the service, no matter the size. This culture has deep values of respect for the individual and responsiveness to what is most important to and for them, and is not confined

to disability services but also offers this to the wider community (*Neill and Smith*, 2008: 2).

Person centred thinking tools used every day are increasingly the building blocks creating more flexible and responsive services. With a greater level of consistent and ongoing application of person centred approaches, this can be achieved[3].

There are a number of factors that will also influence this change:

- the growing voice of people with a disability, their families and advocates
- greater control by people with a disability over how they choose to spend their funds
- a more competitive market where service providers will need to see the people they serve as consumers
- the growing number of individuals who champion a more person centred approach to their work
- dissatisfaction with existing services, together with the desire of staff for change.

The use of person centred approaches helps to focus this energy to support people to help them realise their hopes and dreams, as well as keeping them healthy and safe in a way that makes sense for them.

Features of a person centred organisation include the following:

- it knows its purpose and what it can offer others
- its leaders and decision makers know the people that the organisation supports
- everyone across all levels of the organisation understands the importance of taking a person centred approach
- it continues to evolve – it is fluid and learning
- it is open and unafraid of taking risks and making mistakes
- it consists of a group of individuals working to one purpose but remaining individuals
- it is not precious about its own resources, sharing for the good of all individuals (*Neill and Smith*, 2008: 8).

3.5. Understanding the existing culture

If your organisation does not have a quality culture then the first step in changing the culture is to understand what it currently is. The study by *Simpson* (2008a) found that the leaders of an organisation often perceived their culture to be more positive than middle managers or staff. Therefore it's important to implement a range of strategies to monitor various aspects of the culture and to act on what these feedback mechanisms tell you. If you lead the organisation it is also important that you model the behaviour you would like to characterise your organisation.

Tip

In order to uncover the unwritten ground rules that guide the behaviour of staff it can be useful to pose questions such as those listed below:

- *Around here, service users are...*
- *Around here, communication is...*
- *Around here being open and honest gets you...*
- *Around here, showing initiative is...*
- *Around here, if you criticise your manager...*
- *Around here the only time a manager speaks to you is when...*
- *Around here, getting a complaint is...*

(Simpson, 2008b)

3.6. Principles of effective cultural change

In order to effectively bring about cultural change within an organisation, five key principles should guide your approach:

Strategically aligned – The changes sought need to be clearly consistent with the stated vision and mission of the organisation.

Collaborative – For culture to shift it is important to engage key individuals across all levels of the organisation if there is going to be ownership of the importance of shifting the way things are done around here.

Focused – Clear attention needs to be given to the behaviours to be encouraged and those that need to be challenged.

Open – The process of changing the culture needs to be open in its engagement with people across the organisation and provide opportunities for people to challenge and question as this is part of the process of integrating the new approach for them.

Demonstrated – The cultural shift needs to be demonstrated through people's actions and attitude.

(Success Works, 2008:10)

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3 Progress for Providers is a useful self-assessment tool available through Helen Sanderson & Associates to help service providers to think about their progress in responding to the personalisation agenda. Information about Progress for Providers can be found at http://www.hsapress.co.uk/publications/progress-for-providers. aspx#ID1458

3.7. Use of appreciative inquiry approach to complaints

A common reaction to receiving a complaint can be defensiveness. It is often perceived as a criticism of the service rather than being seen as an opportunity to improve. A critical aspect of how you respond to and what you are likely to learn from receiving a complaint is the extent to which you look for what you are doing well and then seek to do more of this, rather than focusing exclusively on what is not working and how to fix it.

In bringing about organisational change the appreciative inquiry (AI) method offers an exciting way to embrace organisational change. Its assumption is simple: *'every organisation has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.'* (*Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros*, 2003) It encourages organisations to identify what is working well and then seeks to broaden this successful approach to other tasks that may not be performed as well by the organisation.

This is based on the premise that organisations change in the direction in which they inquire. Therefore organisations which inquire into problems will keep finding problems, but an organisation which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. These discoveries can then help to build a new future where the best becomes the norm (*Seel*, 2008).

In using the attached self audit tool you are encouraged to look at what is working well in your service and how this experience can be broadened to other areas of operation.