

Organization Success - Leadership Development and Management Development

Learning to Involve Service Users: Can Mental Health Service Users Influence the Quality of Services They Receive?

Bolton Mental Health and Social Care Services is an integrated service which comprises Social Services Mental Health and the Royal Bolton Hospital psychiatric services. The goal of integration was to position the service user at the centre of our provision of services, and ensuring a clear and easy pathway for service users to access provision. I became Team Leader of Mental Health Provider Services and responsible for the overall management of supported accommodation and day and employment services for service users.

I joined a Revans Action Learning programme at the time I took on this responsibility. As a result, after diagnosing my new situation at work this led to my thinking about the position of service users in our service. How could I involve them more in the services I provided? The Department's procedures seemed to positively discriminate against the involvement of users in anything other than as passive recipients. What would I have to do to change this?

I subsequently implemented a Service User Research Group (SURG) consisting of 9 service users and myself. From there, together, we proceeded to research ways to identify the services - the services users needed - and how current services could be improved to meet these needs. We were a group that was engaging in continuous learning as we discussed our situation, came up with ideas and acted on them - and learned from our actions. We took different approaches to the research and evaluation. Some of the results of our actions and our research did bring change which were:

- Research training gave SURG the skills to evaluate the services they were reviewing and truly empowered them to recommend that changes were made to service provision.
- SURG felt more empowered because my Department upheld SURG's recommendations in their discussions with the service providers.
- Services users in SURG reported an improvement in their mental health symptoms as an off shoot of being part of SURG and learning together in a mutually supportive way.

There were other unexpected benefits to some members of the service user group. One member was able to apply the learning she gained to enhance her personal life. As a result of the new confidence she wrote:

I myself gained a lot from being a member of SURG, my self esteem and confidence grew. I am able to speak publicly and have returned to college in order to further my career prospects. I would not have thought this possible two years ago, but now I am very positive about my future. In fact, I now envisage a future!' (SURG member and service user.)

I believe there is always personal and professional learning that occurs when a manager engages in Revans Action Learning. This is often times the precursor for organizational change and improvement.

I learned many things, on a personal level, throughout the Revans programme and the research project. I learned again when I came to write up my experiences and ideas. I realized, I see the world as I have been conditioned by my life experiences to see it, and I describe my views using those perceptions as my frame of reference. On occasion, during the programme and the research, it was difficult for me to understand why other people didn't share my perceptions, but as I became more aware of my assumptions and the basic paradigms I was using, I realised the extent to which I had been influenced by my experiences. It then became easier to test out my assumptions against reality (my research) via the discussions I had with my action learning group colleagues (SURG). This opened up my perceptions to the ideas of others, and gave me a more objective viewpoint leading me to experience 'paradigm shifts'. One of these shifts happened when John Morris (2005) asked me 'what would happen if we all took off our hats?' and I understood the full impact that role-playing has on our lives. Paradigm shifts can be sudden illuminations, as with the question John Morris asked me, or the slower dawning of understanding that happened following discussions with my action learning group, and when I reflected on what had been discussed.

I was able to understand that my past experience affected the way I interpreted new experiences and I learned that I could choose to re-interpret new experiences to avoid repeating old patterns of perception and behaviour. But I needed others' views, perceptions and challenges to help me to do this. This is what the small group of service users and my own action learning set of other managers provided for me as we engaged in learning together. And for that I am grateful.

-Diane Hudson

Morris, John (2005) In Hudson, D. *Learning to Involve Service Users: Can Mental Health Service Users Influence the Quality of Services They Receive?*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Salford, England.