2014

Facilitating Interagency Collaboration – Creating a Space for Learning in a 'Wicked' World.

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Recommended Citation

Facilitating interagency collaboration – creating a space for learning in a 'wicked' world

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Introduction to the paper

Childrens Services Committees (CSC) in Ireland are structures to bring together all agencies involved in childrens services in a region. Their aim is to achieve better co-ordination in service delivery. This paper describes an ongoing programme developed by the authors to facilitate individuals within six working groups within one CSC to examine the effectiveness of their interagency collaboration. The programme entails engagement of participants in two workshops as well as the creation of a space for action learning within monthly working group meetings. Within this space, group members reflect on their collaborative processes and decide on actions to address identified issues.

This paper will position the work of the CSC in the context of two literatures, firstly, that on 'wicked' issues and inter-agency working, and secondly, the deployment of action learning to foster collaborative inter-agency working relationships. It will describe the particular action learning programme developed by the authors, and discuss how we are also constituting this as a research study, before presenting reflections on the outcomes of the programme.

Wicked Issues and Inter-Agency Working

Societal problems have been described as 'tame' when they have been encountered before, for which solutions are known and which can be resolved by existing organization arrangements, for example, by a single profession, institution or service. 'Wicked' problems are the opposite and often lack even a shared definition and understanding of their causes (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Conklin, 2006). For example, it is well recognised in Ireland, as well as in other western societies, that teenage suicide amongst young men is a problem that requires urgent attention, but how to explain and reverse the rising trends? Are they attributable to high unemployment, a failure to recognise depression, breakdown of social capital, social networking sites that stimulate copycat actions, a crisis in masculinity, or some combination of these and other factors? Various public services and professions touch on the lives of young men – schools, family doctors and public health nurses, sports clubs, and maybe also social workers, religious bodies, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the criminal justice system (gardai/police; probation). A joined-up, multi-professional and inter-agency approach is

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required both to understand and act on such a multifaceted issue as teenage suicide. More broadly it is also now recognized that the really pressing social challenges necessitate a joined-up way of thinking and working to make a real difference to people's lives within a place, be it city, neighbourhood or rural sub-region (Benington and Hartley, 2009).

Action Learning

Despite recognition of the necessity for collaborative working, and even though public funding often comes with strings attached that compel partnership working, in practice collaboration between people from different professional and institutional contexts is not straightforward. Diverse organizational cultural norms, values and practices provide fertile ground for mis-understandings and lack of trust; resource allocation still often remains departmentally compartmentalized, whilst accountability and performance management arrangements continue to pull against inter-agency working. This taut and fragmented mixture is the context in which Action Learning (Revans, 1982) has been found by some to have a role in improving inter-agency working and addressing systemic problems (Mead, 2006; Rigg, 2006; Willis, 2006).

Contribution

This paper provides some observations on how action learning has allowed groups to take the time and space to articulate, and in some cases redefine, the 'wicked' issues they encounter due to the interagency nature of the CSC and to discuss, agree on and take action on ways of addressing these issues. Bringing issues into the gaze in this way has allowed participants to reassess individual and group goals, acknowledge the different perspectives of others, recognise the exclusionary or inclusionary nature of language, highlight power difference and acknowledge the importance of good communication across the CSC and within agencies.

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