

Campaign statement: managing independence

The problem of ‘managerialism’

Many voluntary agencies, particularly those providing services, have adopted models of management antagonistic to social action and change. The origins are to be found in prescriptive and oppressive funding requirements, as well as private sector business practices adopted by the State, at national and local levels. Some agencies navigate these pressures successfully and keep their purpose and soul intact. Others find their inspiration dries up in the face of heavy handed performance management practices they should never have adopted.

Associated with this ‘managerialism’ is:

- A language which enforces, confuses and obscures unequal power relations and agendas
- Commissioning and the contract culture – funds now come with regulatory strings attached, for work which satisfies State agendas, often at the expense of community interests and in which competition is the name of the game. Learning, flexibility, responsiveness, innovation, discretion and co-operation is undermined
- A targets culture – voluntary action is increasingly controlled through time-consuming targets which create prescriptive and uniform expectations which often don’t fit the particular context, the nature of the work or the needs of beneficiaries. Such targets stifle risk and innovation, creativity and spontaneity
- Bogus quality assurance – our world is awash with off-the-shelf mechanistic quality toolkits which tell us little about the real quality of services or activities and how to improve what we do. There is no evidence that such approaches give a better result, indeed there is increasing anecdotal evidence that it, and the bureaucracy that surrounds it, leads to a waste of time and money
- Management approaches – management structure, style and levels of organisational democracy is changing within the VCS. Increasingly, flat structures, team work and needs-led organisation are giving way to top down hierarchies, career managers, widening pay differentials, authoritarian management styles and an absence of internal democratic structures and accountability.

NCIA believes that these practices are changing the nature of the sector in ways that do not fit its purposes, values or activities. We are in danger of creating work-drones and corporate managers, unable to work in solidarity with their users and communities. Managerialism is a mechanism whereby social action is controlled. People, particularly volunteers, attracted to voluntary action and social change are not attracted to these kind of managerial approaches and solutions. The loss of discretion and self determination in the way we run our own organisations is interfering with the relationships between the citizen, voluntary action and the State.

The NCIA campaign

NCIA is calling on the sector to question these practices and work towards alternative models which are more appropriate to our role. Being well managed in the voluntary and community sector is more than just being efficient in providing services, it is about changing society for the better. Whilst it is a proper role of those responsible for making things happen, there are effective models of management that are inclusive and participative, that rely on respect and value dialogue, and that aspire to promote the fullest involvement of activists, staff, volunteers and those benefiting from activities and services.

We intend to spark a debate which will create and reinforce approaches to fit our purposes, nourish our souls, promote self-determination and real quality of action. This will mean that organisational form and culture, management practices and styles will vary. One size does not fit all.

We will put effort into developing the creativity, skills and knowledge needed to create and operate models and practices suitable for a particular agency and its relationship with the outside world, including with funders. A commitment to the cause, and solidarity with those who share this, is as important as professional codes of practice. This will be reflected in recruitment and training.

There will be more practitioner/managers who will know the content of what they are managing and will have ways to be close to the action. They will reflect on the advice of Max De Pree: “the first responsibility is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant”.

Passion, excitement, fun and anger are encouraged and required to balance the more detached nature of professional practices. Being open to alternative viewpoints are valued qualities. Criticism, conflict and difference are seen as a chance to talk and explore.

We will have our own language to say what we mean and mean what we say. Our language will challenge and spark debate.

We will move from targets to intentions, where changes over time are seen as indicative of growth, learning, creativity and flexibility. We will know that change takes time.

The results we get with our work are shaped by those who might benefit. Learning and experimentation is encouraged.

Quality assurance, and other forms of accountability, is tailored by and for agency activities. Off-the-shelf systems are always adapted, if not binned. There is a focus on real quality of work with local people and communities, not only how tidy the office is.

Workers at all levels have appropriate levels of discretion and are trusted and competent to make judgements in their areas of work. Frontline workers will have a strong voice in shaping ways of working; are involved in producing new policies and practices; can influence management styles to support them in their work; and participate in internal forums as part of decision-making. A recognised union or other forms of worker representation are in place.

The interests of who we are here for will be more important than those who fund our activities. We will have our own plans from which to negotiate contracts which do not compromise benefits for communities or conditions for workers. Our relationship with funders is built on an equal and assertive footing. We are honest with funders and tell them what will work and what won't. Funders recognise our expertise and roots, and trust that we know how best to manage our work and tell them about the results. Negotiation is expected to be part of the relationship. We say no to money if need be. We have a diverse funding base.

The costs of managing and running the organisation are seen as reasonable in relation to the direct costs of the work itself. Pay differentials within organisations are kept within an agreed difference between the highest and lowest paid staff. Ethical financial practices are in place, including for investments and pension arrangements, and there are practices that avoid exploitation and discrimination and support ecological sustainability.