

Distinguishing *Caring for Staff* from *Indulging Staff*¹

Staff in the community services industry often face personal pressures and emotional stress unique to this industry. Whilst employers are responsible for providing adequate support to enable each worker to fulfill their work requirements, they are not responsible for all aspects of *personal support*.

Indulging staff occurs at the expense of other team members and/or service users.

Sometimes organisations treat the personal preferences or needs of staff as more important than their professional output. This is particularly common in peer-based organisations, where peer staff are facing similar issues to service users. Prioritising (peer) staff preferences implies that the organisation sees personal support for staff as more important than responding to the needs of (peer) service users. Or, it can suggest that peer staff are more entitled to caring supervision than non-peer staff, thus creating an internal team divide. With the best will in the world, organisations can end up existing more to serve their staff, than to address the rights and needs of service users.

It is critical that organisations and workers clearly distinguish between the personal and professional support needs of staff. Only then, can the distinction between *caring for*, and *indulging*, staff be made.

What is *Personal*? What is *Professional*?

Workers in the community services industry are making ethical judgments constantly in their work. The motivation of each worker is the critical ethical determinant of the distinction between when they are operating as an *individual* (being personally driven), and when they are being a *worker* (being professionally driven):

¹ © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1996, 1999 & 2009 (revised). This handout combines data from 3 previous handouts:

- **Distinguishing *Caring for Staff* from *Indulging Staff*** (1999) drew heavily on ideas generated by participants in a workshop on organisational development/management for experienced workers, Brisbane, February 1999.
- **What is *Personal*? What is *Professional*?** (1996) was based on ideas from participants in a workshop sponsored by HIV/AIDS Worker Training Program, Adelaide, September 1996.
- **Exercise: Developing a Personal Support Base** (1996) was based on a concept developed by Max Kau for the (Commonwealth) Office of Youth Affairs in 1986.

Professional		Personal	
Worker Motivation	Working in others' interest (eg. client, team, agency)	Worker Motivation	Working in their own interest
Possible Side Effect	May have good outcomes for the worker ... but there's no guarantee!	Possible Side Effect	May have good outcomes for others ... again, there's no guarantee.
Limitations/ Ethics	Determinants of what constitutes <i>professional</i> behaviour may come from others (eg. organisational ethics or team norms). The worker may even be required to practice in a way they wouldn't personally choose whilst in the workplace ² .	Limitations/ Ethics	Are self-defined.

TABLE 1: Definitions of Professional and Personal Behaviour

These definitions are separate from questions such as *Are workers being paid for the work?* or *Is the work part of a worker's Job Description?* They are concerned with the worker's attitude, state of mind and notion of responsibility.

A second level of thinking when distinguishing personal and professional behaviour might involve problem solving specific *personal/professional* dilemmas such as: place, time, topic, person, power, perceptions, expectations, state of mind/body and pay³.

Employer Responsibilities

Community services organisations should be congruent in their attitudes toward staff and service users. This includes modelling productive and appropriate caring behaviour in the management of staff. It may include providing personal support, counselling or debriefing when the staff member faces emotional issues which are a barrier to fulfilling their job requirements. It does not include modelling indulgence (including creating dependence)!

² If required to practice in a way they actually disagree with, the worker might need to rethink their involvement in the agency and/or actively campaign to change agency policy.

³ This list is based on ideas from participants in a workshop sponsored by HIV/AIDS Worker Training Program, Adelaide, September 1996.

Workers may be indulged by other staff or management:

- *Turning a blind eye* to their illegitimate absence from work, or lateness, or shortened working hours, or long lunches.
- Spending large amounts of time debriefing personal crises with no direct impact on, or relationship to, their work.
- Approving pay rises unrelated to their productivity, responsibilities or competency levels.

Each of these activities reduces the amount of time and attention available to address the (individual or collective) needs of service users, the organisation or other team members. If organisations truly believe that they exist to meet the preferences and/or needs and/or rights of service users, then it is contradictory to focus on addressing the personal needs of staff.

Drawing the line between caring for, and indulging, staff is not a simple matter. Staff care is critical to optimising organisational productivity, and some staff have higher legitimate care needs than others. In particular, this is often the case for peer based staff, who typically face personal and professional dilemmas beyond those of non-peer staff.

Ultimately, organisational decision should be driven by the best possible outcomes for service users. Some of the criteria that should be considered when distinguishing *care* and *indulgence* are:

- **Productivity** - evaluating the impact on the morale/productivity of the total staff team.
- **Staff retention** - weighing up the productivity of an experienced worker over time, against the loss of productivity whilst training a new staff member.
- **Productivity** - developing a sophisticated analysis of productivity (short/long term, quality/quantity, staff/client needs).
- **Motivation** - evaluating the worker's willingness to honestly assess their personal motivation for the job. (In order to make this assessment, it is important to give the worker assurances about the legitimacy of a range of motives ... from the personal, to the emotional, to the political.)
- **Investment in future** - allowing significant time off where a worker intends to return to work **or** needs to make a clear decision about whether to return. (This is not about approving extended leave as giving a *pseudo reward* for length of service in a demanding position.)
- **Competence** - measuring the worker's ability to make their own judgments about what they need in order to work productively, and their willingness to seek management support.

The general ethical principle, *Do unto others*, should apply equally to how both staff and service users are treated, in community services organisations. However, this should always be located in the context of the expectation that all staff will behave in a *professional* manner, including being driven by professional motivations in the workplace.

Worker Responsibilities

Employers are responsible for ensuring the adequacy of workplace-provided supervision and support. This includes clearly identifying how workers can access each are of legitimate supervision and support - *developmental supervision, debriefing, line management* and *performance assessment*⁴.

Many community services workers feel a *personal* need to supplement employer-provided professional support. This can occur at a formal or informal level. Typically, this need arises in four key areas:

- **Professional Development:** Developing competencies beyond the level required to do the worker's current job (eg. information, skills, knowledge, career development, critical analysis/reflection, values clarification).
- **External Influence:** Influencing external factors which impact on the worker, their organisation or their job, which is outside their formal work role (eg. advocacy or activism in relation to organisational, political, interpersonal, social, structural or economic factors).
- **Emotional Support:** Dealing with issues beyond those directly affecting the worker's ability to fulfill their job responsibilities (eg. personal exploration, social support or counselling).
- **Workload Resourcing:** Getting additional ideas, support and skills development beyond those required to be *functionally accountable* (eg. work planning, self-management/organisation, time management, prioritising ... and distinguishing the personal and organisational dimensions of the worker's needs!)

Sometimes, organisations make a decision to invest in the longer term personal or professional development of a worker. This may have long term benefits for the organisation, or the industry more widely. However, this should be seen as a reflection of organisational generosity, rather than an organisational responsibility.

Ultimately, each individual worker is responsible for meeting personal interest/needs beyond those required to do their job for which they were employed, to the standard required by their employer.

An Exercise - Addressing Personal Support Needs

The following is an exercise individual workers can undertake, to assist in addressing their personal interests and needs. It is based on the 4 possible areas listed above, and focuses on identifying personal resource people with the capacity to value-add to the worker's development.

⁴ For further details about these different areas of supervision and support, download a free handout entitled *Understanding External Supervision* (2008) from: http://www.suziqconsulting.com.au/free_articles.htm

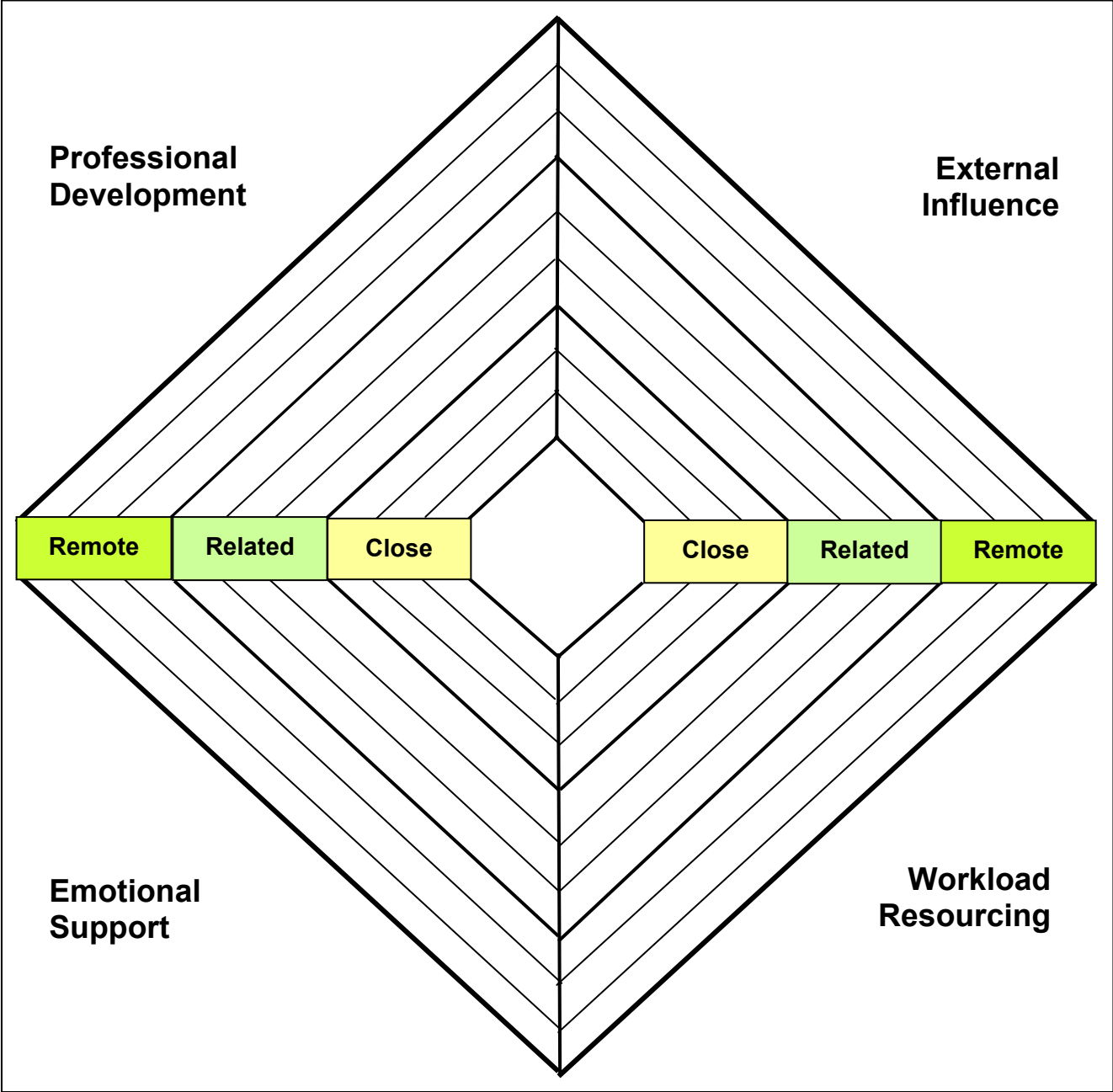


DIAGRAM 1: Levels of Personal Development Resourcing