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Supporting Practitioners in Children's and Adults' Social Care:

How to develop individual, team and cultural strategies in an organisation.

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Introduction

Research review and practice resource

Statutory organisations have changed dramatically over the years. They have grown in size and also adapted structurally in an attempt to meet government requirements and the needs of service users. Although, as a whole, social care organisations strive to improve the outcomes of their service users by working towards collective aims and objectives, it is widely recognised that organisations cannot achieve this without the cooperation and motivation of the staff they employ (McFadden et al 2015). Therefore, if organisational goals are to be met, it is important that staff members are contented in their role and that the team they are a part of is supportive. Yet understanding how social care organisations can work towards developing a supportive culture for all its staff is often an overlooked aspect of children's and adults' social care practice. This is mainly because organisations inherently focus on the needs of those they are providing a service for rather than the needs of staff who are providing that service. There are, however, many organisational studies and theories from disciplines such as human relations, management and psychology which examine in some depth the context and setting of workplaces and organisations (Bissell 2012). Produced primarily for children's social care agencies and authorities, this resource draws on some of these studies and theories; and considers the implications for social care and social work agencies, authorities and practice. In doing so, different parts of the social care organisational hierarchy will be explored: the frontline practitioner; the team and the organisation.

The resource considers how frontline practitioners, social care teams and social care agencies and organisations each contribute, and are affected by, the way an organisational culture develops and functions. Overall the resource emphasises the importance of promoting supportive and enabling organisational cultures and practices. It highlights how organisational cultures in social care can become 'toxic' having a detrimental impact not only on practitioner welfare but also decision making and overall service quality (O'Sullivan 1999). As argued by Horwath (2015) this, in turn, can lead to stress and apathy for both front line staff and service users. In addition, the resource sets out some recommended tips and strategies for developing and promoting supportive social care practice, teams and organisations.

About the author

Jadwiga Leigh is a Lecturer of Social Work in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. In 2005 she qualified as a social worker and worked in both statutory and voluntary child and family settings up until 2013. In 2010 she began her PhD which focused on professional identity and child protection culture both here in the UK and abroad in Belgium. She has written a monograph from the findings of this thesis which is entitled: *Blame, culture and child protection* and has been published with Palgrave Macmillan.

Part 1: The frontline practitioner

Children's and adults' social care and social work practice can be rewarding yet stressful. Working with families in distress and crisis is a daily activity which can affect practitioners emotionally, mentally and physically (Bissell 2012). However, organisational cultures can also have an effect on the way practitioners feel and with so much focus being placed on improving services, this is an area of social care and social work which is often overlooked (Fisher 2012; Gabriel 2012). This section will begin by examining why it is important for social care practitioners to feel contented in their place of work by exploring the meaning of 'job satisfaction'. It will then discuss the concepts of 'anxiety and stress' and the effects these emotions can have on an individual. The section will conclude by examining the term 'emotional resilience' and consider how practitioners can be emotionally resilient when experiencing feelings of anxiety and stress. The term 'practitioner' will be used throughout this document and refers to any frontline worker who undertakes social care responsibilities such as youth and family support workers and social workers.

1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be defined in many different ways. Some believe it simply relates to how content an individual is with his or her work, whereas others believe it can be obtained through the motivational factors of doing what is perceived as valuable work (Bissell 2012). However, according to Fredrick Herzberg (1966), who developed the two factor theory, individuals are not necessarily satisfied in work merely when lower-order psychological needs (pay and working conditions) are met, although they can become dissatisfied if they are not met. Rather, individuals are more likely to be satisfied in work when their higher-level psychological needs are met, for example, through achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement or another valued aspect of the nature of the work itself. Relating the two-way theory to children's and adults' social care and social work, we can develop an insight into how practitioners may achieve, or be prevented from achieving, job satisfaction: that is practitioners are more likely to feel job satisfaction when they feel valued and respected for the work that they do; and/or when they are rewarded through promotion; and/ or when these are recognised with being provided with more responsibility.

Conversely, when local authorities revise and downgrade pay scales and levels, and increase expectations in terms of practitioner workload without accompanying rewards and recognition, practitioners are likely to feel undervalued and unrecognised professionally.

However, recently more contemporary studies about job satisfaction and social care professions have revealed that practitioners also have a strong need for shared understanding, cooperation and communication with their team supervisor (Ferguson 2011; Beddoe 2010). Therefore, the quality of the relationship between the manager and the practitioner is important and practitioners are more likely to enjoy their job when they receive quality supervision as their morale and attitude towards practice will improve. In fact, Jan Horwath (2015) has argued that if organisations do not pay attention to the work environment alongside staff development and supervision support, they risk creating a 'toxic duo', an unhealthy alliance which can emerge between a practitioner who feels neglected at work, who is likely to subsequently struggle to work effectively with a parent who is also struggling to meet the needs of their child. Managing the

emotional demands of the job is therefore an aspect of social care which not only improves job satisfaction for practitioners but also means they are then, in turn, more likely to engage and improve outcomes for children and their families.

Reflective exercise 1: Your job satisfaction

Being aware of what motivates (and de-motivates) you as a practitioner working in children's and/or adults' social care can help to identify important individual, team and organisational issues and circumstances that support or limit your job satisfaction, and hence professional performance and sustainability.

On your own or with a colleague, consider and discuss the following questions:

1. As a practitioner in children's or adults' social care, what gives you job satisfaction? Is this related to your motivations for doing your job?
2. As a practitioner in children's or adults' social care, what job-related circumstances or factors reduce your job satisfaction?
3. If you are unclear about anything in points 1-2 discuss with your colleague and develop a list of what you each need to find out about and how you will find out about it.

2. Anxiety and stress

There are many who agree that social care and social work are stressful occupations. Practitioners often face many challenges in meeting the needs of clients with complex and multiple needs as well as operate in difficult circumstances, frequently, for example, facing adverse public, or indeed professional, opinion (Bennett et al. 1993). From an organisational perspective, additional stress can stem from high caseloads, reduced resources, staff shortages and structural change. Stress can induce the powerful emotive state of anxiety for some practitioners and is often characterised by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil which can stimulate feelings of fear, uneasiness and worry (McFadden 2015).

Stress and anxiety, within social care and social work as well as within other areas of practice and interaction, are also often cited as major barriers to effective communication (Koprowska 2005). When practitioners start to feel overloaded, rather than talk to their manager in supervision, they may seek strategies which help them avoid the opportunity to vent their feelings. Some strategies include retraction ('I'm just having a bad day'), going off sick or even resigning (Bissell 2012). However, communication could also be impeded by practitioners feeling uncomfortable or inhibited by what they can or cannot say to a more senior colleague. This kind of barrier can prevent the individual from finding support and can instead contribute to heightened experiences of stress and anxiety.

3. Emotional resilience

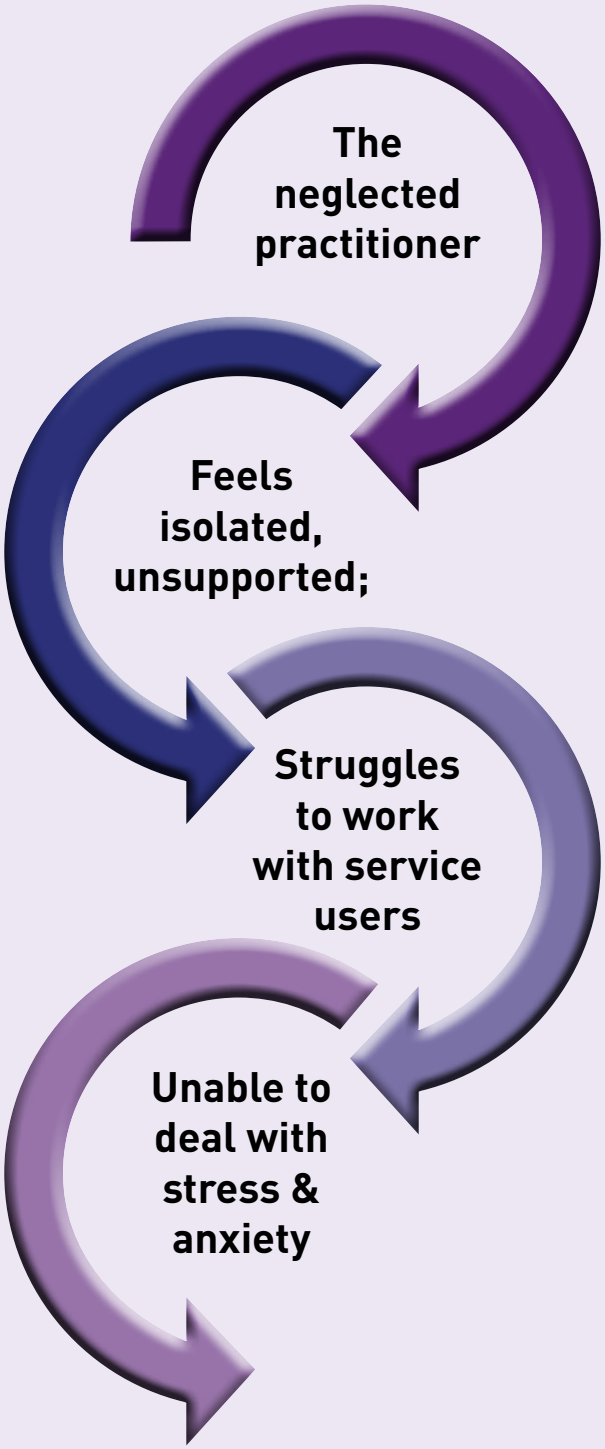
The concept of resilience is well established in social care and social work research and practice in relation to services users who have experienced trauma, adversity and neglect. Resilience refers to "the ability to "recover" from adversity, react appropriately, or "bounce back" when life gets tough" (Grant and Kinman 2013: 5). However, recently it has been recognised that social care practitioners also need to be emotionally resilient if they are to

avoid feelings of anxiety and stress, and achieve instead job satisfaction. In social care and social work contexts, increasing attention has been given to resilience as being a 'protective factor' which can engender well-being, positive emotions, optimism and hope in the face of challenges, difficulties and stress (Bonnano 2004; Collins 2008; Grant and Kinman 2012; Rajan-Rankin 2014). Resilience is therefore influenced by a combination of vulnerability and protective factors lodged in personal attributes, the organisational context and within aspects of the profession and its political context (Adamson et al. 2012). However, it is important to remember that what might be seen as a protective factor for one individual may be experienced as a stressful situation for another (Ungar 2004). Additionally, what may support an individual to survive and thrive in practice on one occasion, may not always be effective and at others times an individual may find it more difficult to cope and manage the demands on them and the circumstances they find themselves in (Adamson et al. 2012). It is during the most demanding situations that resilience is commonly experienced and demonstrated (Bonanno 2004). Resilience therefore does not imply invincibility and it is not infinite, but it does signal significant skills and capabilities to manage and resist becoming overwhelmed to the point of extreme physical or psychological distress (Adamson et al. 2012).

Factors which contribute to the feeling of resilience among practitioners include optimism in the face of adversity (Collins 2008), effective coping and problem-solving skills (Wilks and Spivey 2010) and taking care of one's self (Beddoe et al. 2011). Skills for self-reflection, empathy and emotional intelligence have also been linked to an individual feeling resilient (Grant and Kinman 2012; Morrison 2007). Morrison's (2007) reference to 'emotionally intelligent workplaces' within children's social care is especially important as Morrison describes the kind of organisational culture which aims to identify early signs of stress and burnout in staff, and is one which in turn promotes empathy, reflection and supportive supervision (Rajan-Rankin 2013).

Diagram 1:
The emotionally resilient practitioner

Diagram 2:
The neglected practitioner



Reflective exercise 2: The 'emotionally resilient practitioner' and the 'neglected practitioner'

On your own or with a colleague, review the two diagrams above. Think about, discuss and/or reflect on the following questions:

- Which cycle do you most identify with?
- Think of a situation you have experienced recently that comes to mind when considering the question above – What was the situation? How did it make you feel? What went well/ not so well? What were the reactions of others? Have you spoken about it in supervision?
- Reflecting now on this situation, what might you do (either in terms of doing things the same way or differently) next time this or similar situation arises?

Part 2: The team

Teams are strongly influenced by an organisational culture and the individuals who are part of that team. When teams start to struggle and become fragmented, this can have an effect on even the most determined individual caseworker in one way or another (Bissell 2012). It can also have a negative impact on service users if they find they are affected by differences in decision making, motivation and contact among practitioners and managers working within local authority, locality or service teams (McFadden et al. 2015). However, when a team works together well and supports other teams across services in the local authority it can often contribute to more effective local practice (Ferguson 2011).

Effective team work and multi-agency working can only take place when the right working conditions are in place. Teams need to have the time to build multi-agency links and relationships. Although some services are familiar with the work that others do and work well together, some find this aspect more challenging due to having different views on remits around roles and thresholds (Leigh 2017). This section will therefore explore these points in more detail focusing in particular on team dynamics, work setting and multi-agency team working.

1. Team dynamics

Being aware of team dynamics and developing a good team is a challenging skill for team managers and one which when mastered needs to be continually nurtured and maintained. One particular issue that can emerge in social care agencies is when team members find they are not located in the same place with other members of their team. If practitioners also find they do not have their own desk or a permanent place to work from it can damage team spirit and peer support networks (Leigh 2014). The use of office space and environment is often overlooked in social care and social work because practitioners carry out home visits engaging with services users and families often in their own home (as well as meet with other professionals in a range of service and community settings). Yet it is an aspect of professional circumstances which influences team culture and, if not considered carefully, the consequences of not having a permanent place to work from can increase the likelihood of practitioners' feeling isolated and less likely to access support when needed (Leigh 2017).

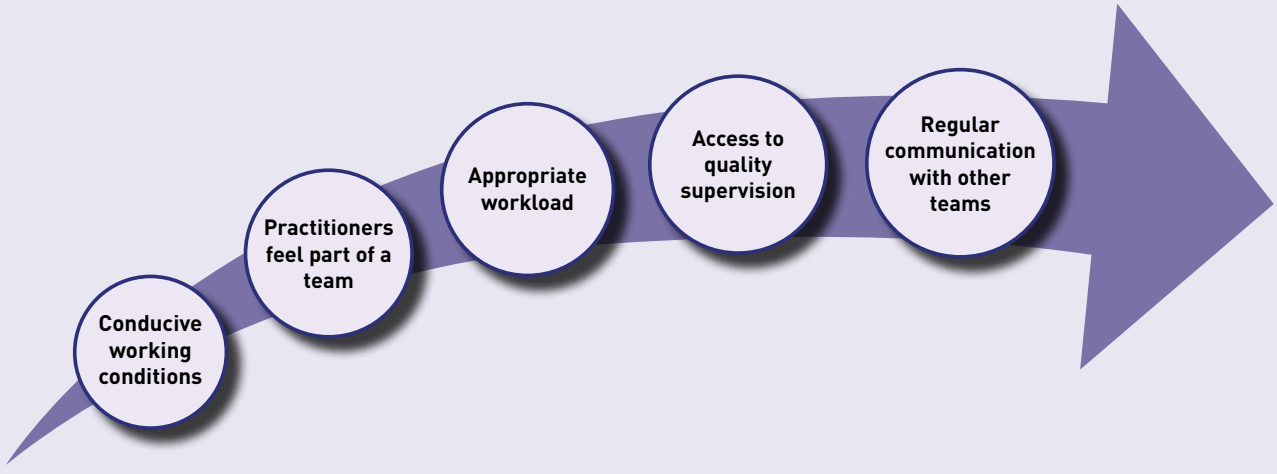
Carver et al. (1989) suggest that social support from team members and supervisors is sought for two reasons. A practitioner is seeking support for instrumental reasons, namely seeking practical advice, assistance or information which can help solve a problem. The second is seeking support for emotional reasons, namely getting moral support, sympathy or understanding from others who may be more empathetic. Talking about stress-related thoughts and feelings helps people to impose a cognitive structure to facilitate integration and resolution of stressful experiences, whereas constraints on disclosure of these feelings can impede these processes (Lepore et al. 2000). Peer and team support are therefore very important if practitioners are to avoid stress and anxiety.

Another key issue which affects the way a team functions is workload. The more time practitioners spend completing administration tasks the less time they have to spend carrying out direct work with service users. Recent research identified that appropriate workload balance provides practitioners with the space to spend valuable time with service users (Beddoe 2010; Ferguson 2011). Parents have also said that they want formal support services to move away from adversarial and unequal relationships to ones that are more collaborative and cooperative (Barlow and Scott 2010). Such complex relationship management is harmonious with a team becoming more emotionally resilient because practitioners need to balance organisational demands with service user expectations as well as their own values and abilities. Trying to get this right can create pressure on practitioners. Creating a supportive team culture is important if practitioners are to achieve these outcomes.

2. Improving multi-agency networking

Communication and support within teams are vital but it is also important that social care teams are able to communicate with one another successfully. Research has found that effective teamwork across agencies and authorities not only improves services received but also develops practitioners' experience (Leigh 2017). When teams stop communicating with each other it can affect inter-agency relationships as one team can start to overly criticise the performance or approach of another team. Yet if opportunities are created for teams to meet, and these are attended by the relevant practitioners, issues relating to communication, thresholds and role responsibilities can substantially be resolved.

Diagram 3: The effective team



Reflective exercise 3: Managers and teams

As a manager, reflecting on the key points discussed above, consider the following:

- What are the aims and objective of your social care team? Which practitioners, and practitioner roles, does the team encompass? What are the main aspects of your role as team manager?
- How would you say your team currently functions? What kind of issues have you noticed/ heard emerge recently? How have you managed these? What could you do to introduce and promote positive changes? What would these consist of?
- How often do you organise meetings for your team to meet with other teams? What has prevented this from happening? What could you do to increase the opportunities for these meetings to take place?
- What kind of relationship do members of your team have with you? How do you respond when practitioners come and talk to you about problems that they're having? What feedback do you seek from them about your own practice?

Reflective exercise 4: Practitioners and teams

As a children's or adults' social care or social work practitioner, reflecting on the key points discussed above, consider the following:

- What are the aims and objective of your social care team? Which practitioners, and practitioner roles, does the team encompass?
- How does your team function? What kind of issues have you noticed/ heard emerge recently? How have these made you feel? What could you do to raise these issues? How might you be able to help positive change to take place?
- What kind of relationship do you have with other team members? How do you respond to colleagues when they talk to you about their problems? How do you respond to your manager when s/he talks to you and the team about their concerns/ plans?
- How often do you attend meetings with other teams? What has prevented this from happening? What could you do to help these meetings take place?

Part 3: The organisation

An organisation is a group of people who work towards the same purpose. Organisations are a means of constituting relations between people, ideas and things that would not otherwise occur (Bissell 2012). Organisations are therefore powerful structures which are held together with organisational leaders, managers and frontline workers. In social work, the concept of power is often thought of as being oppressive, constraining, negative or antagonistic. Yet if power is used effectively it does have the ability to be positive, creative and empowering for both practitioners and service users (Leigh 2017).

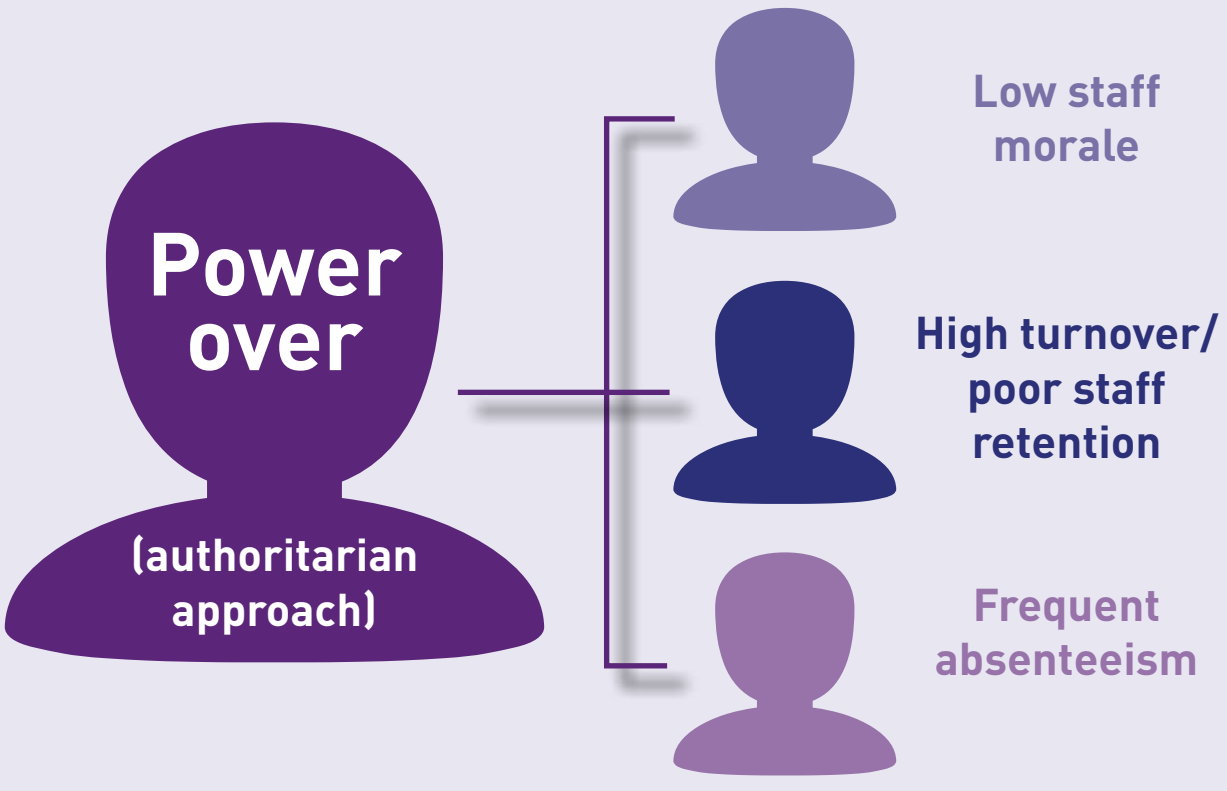
Power concerns the ways in which social relations shape capabilities, decisions and

change. These social relations can do positive things but they can also block things from happening. Power is ultimately about the choices that are made, the actions that are taken, the services that are provided, the privileges that are bestowed, the rights that are claimed and the wrongs that are done (Clegg et al. 2006). This section will explore the notion of power in organisations in more detail. In particular, it will identify the difference between an organisation that exerts negative power over its staff and one which in contrast strives to empower those who work for it.

1. The 'power over' approach

F.W. Taylor (1911) developed a management theory which viewed the worker as an individual and a responsible employee. Taylor was primarily concerned with productivity and performance of each employee and it was this focus that developed the intellectual and social context within which management was first defined. Taylor believed that an employee was paid by the employer for his time but that this time was systematically wasted and squandered by the employed person. Taylor therefore felt that employees would become more productive if they were reformed and successfully monitored by a manager. Instead of allowing employees to choose their own tasks and train themselves as best they could, Taylor tasked managers to be the ones responsible for employees' progress and productivity. Managers therefore took on the role of exercising power in an oppressive way by getting employees to do what they wanted them to do. Although Taylor's approach to using managers to gain power over employees spread rapidly and globally, it soon became clear that there was a side effect to this form of authoritarian approach which led to consequences such as low morale amongst employees and managers, high turnover of staff and frequent absenteeism.

Diagram 4: The 'power over' approach to management

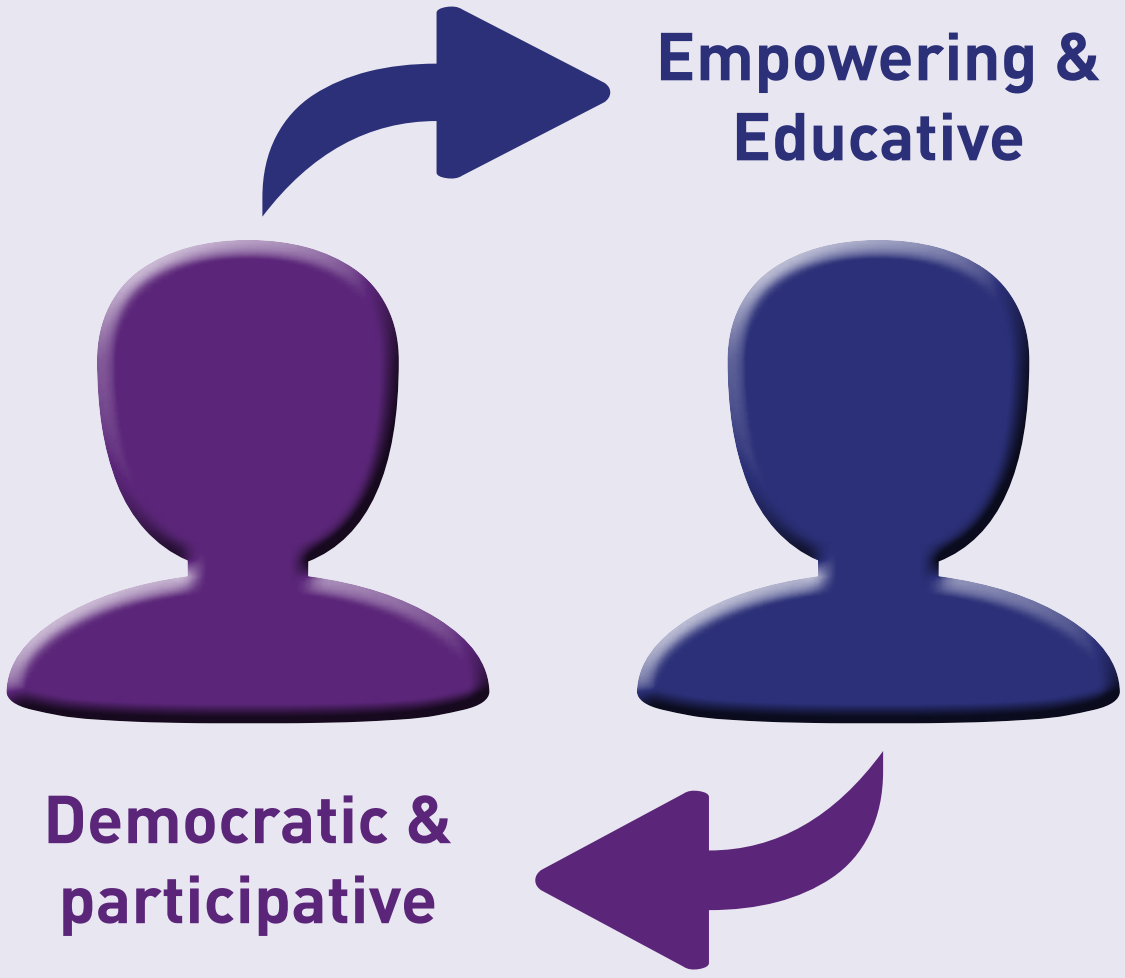


2. 'Power with' approach

Not everyone shared Taylor's approach to management and the use of managerial powers. Mary Follett (1923), a social worker in Boston, recognised that the 'power over' approach did not create the conditions in which managers and workers could cooperate together effectively. She developed the 'power with' approach which aimed to achieve collaborative work which would not only be productive but also create a form of social justice. Central to Follett's view of 'democratic potential' was the concept of 'power with'. Follett saw power as legitimate and inevitable but not authoritarian. Follett was concerned with how power could democratise and sought to distinguish the 'power with' from the 'power over' approach.

Follett (1923) had seen in her own practice that organisations could be successful if they developed a form of 'coactive power' rather than 'coercive power'. If employees worked in a democracy they had the opportunity to exercise power at the grassroots level because they were listened to and were able to share their experiences. Democratic diversity had great advantages and created environments in which managers and their teams could learn to co-operate well with one another. A democratic organisation therefore provided workers with the experience of being participative and it was this aspect of the process that made work empowering and educative.

Diagram 5: The 'power with' approach to management



3. Organisational Culture

Organisational cultures are important aspects of, and influences on, social work practice. The way in which a culture functions can affect the way in which those who work for it respond to one another and it can also affect the way in which services are delivered. For example, a culture of suspicion can impact negatively on communication because it can lead to all employees fearing hidden implications for actions and create an atmosphere of mistrust. These kind of cultures can develop from a 'power over' approach as communication between employees can be obstructed by position and rank. Such barriers can prevent the free flow of information and impede a learning organisation from developing. It can also have significant consequences for the outcomes of service users.

Supportive organisational cultures appear to thrive when organisational leaders and middle managers, and their authority is decentred, in the sense of effective, routine and embedded managerial-frontline practice links and relationships. When organisational leaders are part of the frontline working environment and take part in discussions, meetings and social care practice - communication is less inhibited as better relationships are encouraged between the organisational tiers. Practitioners are able to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with all senior managers. In turn, managers are in a good position to understand what frontline practitioners face. This kind of practice is therefore more likely to lead to a 'power with' organisation, one which infuses learning with a collaboration of knowledge and skills between all parties. It also creates a culture which is able to provide a more rapid and effective response to the needs of service users.

Reflective exercise 5: The role of senior managers

As a senior manager working within social care and social work teams, agencies and organisations, think about the key points to have emerged from the above section and critically reflect on the following questions:

- What kind of approach does your organisation implement: a 'power over' or a 'power with' approach? How do you know that this take places? How do you think this leadership style works?
- How often do you meet with practitioners without their team managers present? Would you say that you have managed to build good relationships with your frontline staff? Would you say you actively seek to foster a safe and comfortable working environment for practitioners to work in/ from? Do you struggle to implement the changes you wish to make within the current economic climate? What could you do to develop more innovative ways of working with practitioners?
- How often do you organise forums for practitioners, service users and management to come together and talk? What was the outcome? What did you learn from such an event? Have you seen a change in the way different groups relate to one another?

Summary and key messages

- Social care organisations inherently focus on the needs of those they are providing a service for rather than the needs of staff who are providing that service. But if organisational goals are to be met, it is important that staff members are contented in their role and that the team they are a part of is supportive.

- Stress and anxiety are often cited as one of the main barriers to effective communication among practitioners, teams and with services users in social care and social work. This can affect the individual, the team, the organisation and the quality of children's and adult services. Ensuring all individual practitioners feel supported, valued and safe is important if an organisation is to function harmoniously.

- Further, as individuals and teams do not operate in a vacuum it is important to recognise that they are always part of a wider organisational context which needs to provide the kind of environment which supports and develops practitioners' emotional resilience.

- Teams are strongly influenced by an organisational culture and the individuals who are part of that team. But effective team work and multi-agency working can only take place when the right working conditions are in place. If team managers encourage the use of open dialogue it can help resolve issues and promote good communication practices amongst practitioners. In addition, the sensitive use of space and environment in the workplace needs to be considered if practitioners are to feel included and valued.

- For supportive teams and agencies to be developed and sustained, senior leaders in the organisation need to take responsibility for creating a workplace which fosters a safe and supportive climate which facilitates both team and individual resilience (Hiebert 2006). This can be achieved with the support of team and service managers who need to make sure that the workload demands are appropriate and that practitioners can access support from their peers and supervisors often.

- Managers who draw from a 'power with' approach have been known to improve practitioners' experience of their work because it is participative. Coactive power is achieved by collaborating with team members and service users through a combination of positive and reflective leadership; providing of effective supervision; ensuring comfortable team working environments; monitoring appropriate workloads; developing multi agency team communication opportunities and giving social care practitioners chances to develop. It is through this participatory approach that organisations will be more likely to provide effective and responsive services for children and their families.

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- **Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council**
- **Lincolnshire County Council**
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