

Be positive, or else!

THE AGED CARE SECTOR HAS BEEN TAINTED BY A FEW HORRIFIC CLAIMS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT FROM DISGRUNTLED STAFF IN RECENT YEARS. SUCH NEGATIVE EVENTS ARE, THANKFULLY, FEW AND FAR BETWEEN, BUT THEY STILL BEG THE QUESTION: DOES THE SECTOR NEED AN IMPROVED ATTITUDE AND CULTURE CHANGE MAKE-OVER? YASMIN NOONE SEEKS ADVICE FROM TWO 'POSITIVE CULTURE' TRAINING EXPERTS.



GARY MELLOR used to be a solider. He was once a nurse, an aged care worker, occupational health and safety expert and health academic. Most recently, he took a job with Eden in Oz & NZ as the organisation's training and culture change manager. Mellor now shares his thoughts on best practice in culture training, garnered from real life experiences and a unique understanding of workplace power structures.

1 CHANGE A PERSON'S BEHAVIOUR BY CHANGING THE WAY THEY PROVIDE CARE.

"Aged care staff tend to, habitually, see the physical side of the people they care for," Mellor says. "They see the resident as a jumble of physical problems or a deterioration of abilities rather than someone who is doing something in their life. Even at the basic qualification level, we tend to demonstrate that aged care is a poor cousin to acute care and students who get aged care placements don't think it's exciting. This is a misplaced agenda that can be changed. We have to change the frame of reference, the mission and the values about what the work means and how it is done."

Mellor advises encouraging staff to take the first step towards respecting an older person via education. Training should teach staff to, for example, introduce themselves to residents at the start of their shift. And when they go into a resident's room, they should look around and see what 'makes the person', like a photo or piece of memorabilia on display.

2 SUPPORT THE AFTERMATH OF TRAINING

"Training works for some people but the majority leave training sessions unsure about how to put the theory into practice," he says. "That's because we tend to always cut training off at the knees. There is a gap between what staff are taught to do in courses, what the workplace has in mind for them to do day-to-day and what they have to do. Bridging this gap is never really done well: not just in aged care but in health as well."

Mellor suggests mentoring to create a transition between what a person has just learned and the

tasks they have to do. "The staff-mentor relationship ensures staff are not just doing training for the sake of it but that they are putting what they learn into practice."

3 MOST CAN BE TRAINED, SOME CAN'T BE

Mellor is an optimist, believing that most people can be trained to change and respect older people: even if they hold ageist attitudes. But, he admits, "there's always a small proportion of staff in any workplace who don't like what they are doing and will never like it. It will be a self-esteem or a personality issue". But, he says, training in 'soft skills' like communication, empathy and respect can help filter out bad attitudes. "People who are entrenched and really negative tend to make up their mind at that point in the training, before the journey begins, that they don't want to be involved. I think that's a really important process. If the person [who is negative] can't get through the training and doesn't see the light at the end of tunnel, then maybe aged care is not for them? At least they got to the point where they made a decision about where they want to be in their career."

Mellor adds that the way in which managers treat staff will also determine the way that staff treat residents. That's why, he says, "leaders should be trained to talk to staff about how they can make residents happy, and provide them with meaning and value".

FRAN BERRY is the company director of Alive & Kicking Solutions, a training organisation that works with a number of big name aged and home care providers – like Juniper and Silver Chain – to provide workplace education to foster positive cultures. Here are her top three training mantras.

1 BOUNDARIES PREVENT BURNOUT

Staff burnout fuels workplace negativity. Training must recognise the signs of burnout and create new processes to prevent it. "Let's imagine that I care for Mr Jones, a lovely 90-year-old man who's lonely," Berry says. "All he wants to do is talk. And then, he needs 'just one more thing'. The staff member might be going outside their realm of experience to give him all the things and the time he needs. This is well meaning but then Mr Jones becomes dependent on that service the staff member is going out of their way to provide."

The result is that the carer might become frustrated because there are not enough resources

to go around for Mr Jones. Berry suggests that staff receive communication training, based on an acceptance that caring staff are ‘nice people’ who might not know how to say no. Training should teach staff about boundaries and how to discuss the issue with management who can then hook ‘Mr Jones’ up with other services.

2 OBSERVE AND MONITOR ATTITUDES

Berry says there’s often a blind spot when it comes to reporting the quality of home care provided.

“Just because you are a nice person, that doesn’t mean you can communicate well or have all the necessary aspects of the job needed to deliver respectful care to an older person.

“If left unobserved, what you say you do when you go to a person’s house might be different to what you actually do. As long as you provided the clinical care needed, you could just watch television and ignore the older person the whole shift. And no one would know.”

But this is changing, she says. With consumer-directed care now enacted, customer

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feedback will be sought and heard. “Providers will ask the older person if they are satisfied with how the staff member is treating them.”

3 ELIMINATE FRUSTRATION WITH TRAINING

“There are probably small pockets of people who may be bad eggs working in aged care, who take the opportunity to do the wrong thing. But my experience says they are rare. I think there are lots of frustrations in the workplace and people just need a lot of training [to cope].”

Managers need to learn how to evaluate whether the staff is a bad egg, she says, or whether they are being pushed beyond their resources and capability, without support.

Leaders must be trained to balance power and staff must learn to produce empathy through their

actions. Training must be connected to morals and values, and all decisions made after training must be linked to organisational behaviours.

Training also has to be ongoing and regular. “Wouldn’t it be great if you could go to the gym once, use every piece of equipment, and be forever fit and healthy? Where is that gym? I’m signing up now,” Berry says in jest.

“It’s the same when it comes to helping people make decisions in a morally challenging situation. The outcome is based on habit. To change that habit, you need repetition because culture is habit.”

Berry’s message to management is clear: “Invest in training. If you don’t, the likelihood of burnout and frustration is massive. Staff need to do training and develop soft skills all the time, constantly. That’s how we roll.” **HA**

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