

Whose needs are being served: The benefits of bureaucratic shielding

Fletcher Tame has worked in community services for over twenty years; around half that time in management roles. His work in the disability sector began in 2010 and shortly after he attended an Optimal individual service design (OISD) course, facilitated by Michael Kendrick & CRU.

Fletcher strives to find, make and improve ways of using systems to support people, instead of the other way around. Fletcher spoke of how, as a manager within a large human service, he applies the notion of bureaucratic shielding to his day to day work. Fletcher is a director on CRU's board.

Humans have, for a long time, organised themselves and their resources into bureaucratic structures to get things done. Unfortunately these structures can easily become almost self-sustaining to the point where more effort is required from people to support the system rather than the other way around. It's the tail wagging the dog.

In human services this can mean that priorities and "what's important" moves away from serving people to something else. This phenomena of 'process before people' is a potential vulnerability of all systems and is not restricted only to large service providers.

"Formal" disability services and supports are almost entirely funded and delivered via bureaucracies (large and small). It follows then that even with the noblest of intentions, disability services delivered in this way are inevitably prone to deliver the darkness of 'the system' along with any light that comes with 'pure' support.

As the old state-based bureaucracy is on the way out and a new federally administered bureaucracy is coming in, service providers are re-organising and restructuring themselves accordingly.

While I can accept that this is probably required in order to improve what we have been doing to date, I am left wondering how do we do that without that impacting on the people we serve? I think bureaucratic shielding is a big part of the answer.

I first heard of Bureaucratic Shielding at an Optimal Individual Service Design (OISD) course in 2010, run by CRU. The concept was something of an epiphany for me. I was new to the disability sector and confused as to why I needed to know about building codes, fire safety, CPR, food preparation - and why did everyone I work with put so much time and effort into stuff that didn't seem to have anything to do with people? The course helped me put my reality into a different context and reassure me that I wasn't the one missing the point of our work.

So what is Bureaucratic shielding?

To me, Bureaucratic Shielding is the actions a person can take to intentionally protect people from the destructive, de-humanising, incoherent or largely irrelevant aspects of organisations and systems.

This means working in a manner, and behaving in a way that promotes interpersonal focus and connection, over the impact of non-personal systemic and organisational factors on people. This applies to the people we serve, their families and supporters as well as paid staff.

Examples of this include:

- using plain English instead of jargon and technical language;
- being transparent, available, approachable and not only relying on formal meetings to discuss issues;
- creating space for teams to talk about how their support is/ isn't being effective, instead of focusing on organisational matters;
- not overloading workers with a set of tasks, checklists and procedures so that they are so busy they don't have time speak to the person they are there to support;
- not putting organizational needs and funding considerations ahead of people's human needs. For example, making people who have never met and may not even like each other, live in forced co-tenancies.

What action have you taken because of it?

Because it is so easy for systems to focus on their own needs and not the needs of those they support, we need to be ever-vigilant; this is always a work in progress. That said, I'd like to highlight five actions that can help:

1. **Awareness** - Being aware of and reminding myself of the real reason this work is important. What I do must somehow lead to a person's life improving. It's not about getting my paperwork done. It's also about being aware of the context in which I work and the extent to which it impinges on what I do and am asked to do. Legislation, funding, service agreements, industrial matters and office politics are part of the program in many ways and can be very important for the organization. As a manager they are my responsibility; they are not the responsibility of the people who use our service and we should not pretend they are.

2. **Pushing back** - A CEO I once worked with said "ask yourself what is the link between what I am doing now and benefit for people with disability. If you can't see one, then ask yourself if you should be doing it at all".

Sometimes, you need to say 'no, I'm not going to do that'. I am not advocating being rude or pushy but rather being clear about what your purpose is and how your activities deliver on what your role has promised to deliver. So say no, where you need to.

3. **Absorbing** - Inevitably things will come to you that you cannot push back, so you absorb it. For example, you call the department on behalf of that family; you take the time to explain the funding to the person because the email was too complex; when Workplace Health and Safety want to train support staff in asbestos management - your senior management group gets the training because there are fewer of them, they are already in the office and they will pass the info on in a way that individual teams need, thus protecting their time and resources for people and their families.

4. **Co-create** - If it cannot be avoided, find ways to make the bureaucratic processes more relevant, helpful or accessible to the person you support.

Recruiting staff can and should involve the person receiving support, or at least a family member. Rostering, how funding is used, what and how support is actually delivered are all things that can almost entirely be dictated by the person and their family, with some assistance from paid staff. It doesn't have to be the other way around.

5. **Equipping** - It is not uncommon to see the intent of protecting people being taken too far, resulting in a person who is perfectly capable of much being limited to very little. Bureaucracies are part of life and it can be helpful for people to learn how to deal with life rather always be shielded from it. Giving ideas, encouragement, information and your time to facilitate someone's learning about the system is essential in helping them to drive their own outcomes. You don't have to be qualified, or a genius, or super-knowledgeable about it all. You just need to commit and follow through in enabling a person's growth and independence when it comes to system-wrangling, making their own decisions and speaking for themselves.

Why is this concept important for leaders in the future?

It is important to point out that most leaders are not in management roles, so we must not leave this only to that group.

Australia's new national funding scheme promotes choice and control within a market driven by participants. Customer service is the framework de jour. This is a major shift in how services are provided when in reality, a lot of people have never been seriously asked before what they want or how they want it done; or aren't listened to respectfully when they do express their wishes. There is a conundrum for service providers as they adapt their models to fit the new scheme and navigate this period of change whilst meeting the timely hopes and aspirations of those they serve. They need to be clear on their purpose and priorities because what people really need is time and respectful, abiding commitment, not Policy Direction to get them through this.

The ongoing corporatisation of community services has highlighted the dual tensions of "Money vs Mission". These things are essentially incompatible and have always been, but this combination is now "the way things are". This is why more than ever, we need to be able to identify and deliver what is important to people and their families and do that in a financially sustainable way. We need to find ways to meet the needs of individuals without commodifying them in the process.

Being very clear about the purpose of your work, your role in it and what success looks like - as measured by the people you serve - is critical. Being aware of how quickly systems and bureaucratic requirements can become all-consuming and the importance of keeping focus on what matters to people will guide us all in what is to be shielded and what is to be embraced.

So when it comes to bureaucratic shielding, what one person can do is stay aware; push back; absorb, co-create and equip because a better life is unlikely to be achieved through asbestos management training.