
CRUCIAL TIMES

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Community Resource Unit has received substantial feedback on the previous edition of CRUCIAL TIMES, which carried the theme, Resisting Technocratic Managerialism. It is clear that many people are looking for ways to deflect the onslaught of this style of management. The theme has been continued in this edition, and writers have offered numerous strategies for shielding themselves and others from this impersonal form of management in human services.

editorial

In any organisation, Managers need to manage, and those who fund organisations need to know that money is wisely spent. One of the challenges for both groups is to find a management style and an organisational structure that allows the main activities of the organisation to be done, and to be done well. The demands of financial management, human resource management, information systems management, and pressures from funders along with industrial requirements, presents managers with a landscape littered with tasks that take up valuable time and thinking space, and results in endless paperwork and meetings.

It is not surprising that managers and funders try to deal with these demands through increased use of data collection, performance indicators, assessment criteria, and standardisation processes. These processes become increasingly complex and circular: regulations are developed to further standardise the way organisations do things; and policies are developed to further cement the expectations of staff and for directing them to do the right thing. As organisations grow in size, so do the formal processes.

In this context, Technocratic Managerialism, with its pseudo-scientific overtones, is very seductive. Generic, content-free managers are more likely to be ensnared by such management styles because they lack the knowledge or wisdom that would allow them to focus on the real business of the organisation. When an organisation devotes itself to procedures and processes, the power that is held within funding bodies and service systems

becomes even further entrenched, and focus is diverted away from the well-being and true interests of the individual people whose needs should be served by the organisation.

It is crucial that those who manage or work in human services are able to recognise and name this form of management, and to be conscious about its inherent limitations. It is vitally important that managers have operating assumptions that will lead to processes whereby people with disabilities, and their families, are supported to find fulfilling lives, and are not further alienated from real life at the hands of rigid organisational structures and processes.

Problems that arise in the lives of people with disabilities and their families are not technical matters, requiring technocratic solutions; they are issues that exist in social, physical, moral, and political domains. The things that are helpful to addressing problems are those that allow people in organisations to engage in relationships with people, not transactions. Solutions are helpful when they recognise and foster authority that rests with individuals and families; provide scope for individuals and families to try solutions that grow out of their own situations; promote the well-being of individuals and families as the building-blocks of our communities; and further the capacity of people with disabilities to be engaged in ordinary life. ■

Jane Sherwin

CRU's MISSION STATEMENT

- To challenge ideas and practices which limit the lives of people with disabilities.
- To inspire and encourage individuals and organisations to pursue better lives for people with disabilities.

from the president

Mike Duggan

With the increase of technocratic managerialism, I fear that yet another gulf is being created between the Haves and the Have-nots, and that ultimately people with disabilities will become even more marginalised or finally eliminated. While this claim may sound ‘over the top’, we *must* say it the way it is, otherwise those who are the most dominant and powerful in society will ultimately eradicate the needs of people with disabilities, along with those of other marginalised groups. I assert that there are certain elements of technocratic managerialism, which seems to renew the principles of ‘the survival of the fittest’, that actually oppose the natural principles of social justice. The main principles of social justice include rights, access, equity, and participation in society.

- *Rights*, as a concept, is about ensuring that individuals and groups are dealt with in a fair and open manner, and encompass such principles as the right to have decisions explained and justified, and the right of redress for people who feel they have been unfairly treated.
- *Access* is about ensuring that *all* people are able to access and use community facilities, amenities and services, irrespective of age, physical ability etc.
- *Equity* is about ensuring that financial and other resources are distributed fairly across all sections of society.
- *Participation* is about ensuring that all people have the maximum opportunity to participate in the life of the community.

In contrast to these principles, managerialist beliefs and practices give legitimacy to the pursuit of cost-efficiency and administrative requirements as pre-eminent values. Their decision-making processes are top-down and centrally driven, and seek to avoid all risks, by driving out practices that might otherwise be innovative, flexible, and responsive to the individual needs of each person. Technocratic managerialism, in particular, uses planning that is top-down and imposes performance-indicators and stringent accountability processes that leave those who are the most vulnerable even more vulnerable, more disempowered, and more marginalised. This type of approach generally leads to a rationalisation of service delivery, which in turn, leads to a reduction of direct, personalised services.

One element that will save us *all* – if anything will – is the development, nurturing and maintenance of meaningful, reciprocally giving, supportive personal relationships. We have to honour, respect, and *love* one another. This will require a shift in our thinking, our attitudes, and our values. Such a shift has to be characterised by an emphasis on the sanctity of each person and the importance of personal worth. We have to share with one another openly, honestly, respectfully and reciprocally. We must learn to respect and embrace our inter-dependency. We must learn what ‘being in’ community really means. We must learn how to ‘be in’ community with each other, becoming closer in our relationships with each other, and gaining strength from our union with each other. ■

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Reclaiming Family Business

Margaret Ward is well known for her strong leadership as a Queensland parent. She recently commenced work at the Office of the Public Advocate. In this article, she defines the clear boundaries around what she calls 'family business', and recommends some strategies that enable families to exert their natural authority.

Most families who use services have been frustrated by technocratic managerialism. They are bemused by the increasing complexity of the service system and the widening gap between the call for 'efficiency and effectiveness' and the reality of their son's and daughter's lives.

Technocratic managerialism commonly manifests itself in ongoing restructuring, increased reporting requirements, and an emphasis on management ahead of experience-based knowledge and wisdom. Families work differently. Their ways of solving human problems are messy and idiosyncratic, requiring trial and error, intuition and perseverance. Experience and wisdom allows them to think smarter as they get older and the tasks get harder.

There have been some successes in bridging the gap between the service system and families but those success have been few. Those services that have been successful have shown it is possible to work respectfully with families and shield them from the demands of technocratic managerialism or whatever fad is fashionable at the time.

The March edition of CRUcial Times offered some strategies to service providers who want to work in similar ways. Here, I am offering some strategies for families.

Embrace the natural authority of families.

If you are unsure of your authority as a family member, I suggest you make two lists on a sheet of paper. In the first column, list all the people who have been constant in the life of your son or daughter for the last ten, twenty, or thirty years. In the other column, list all the people who have come and gone over the same period.

My guess is that your first list will be short, naming your family members. There may be others, if you are lucky, and perhaps a few faithful friends or 'extended family'. This list is

valuable because these are the people who can even begin to claim some authority in your son or daughter's life. The other list will be enormous and frighteningly irrelevant.

Michael Kendrick wrote a short pithy, piece called *The Natural Authority of Families*. I suggest you obtain a copy from CRU and stick it on your fridge. In no time you will be clear, realistic, and authoritative and you will need to be if you want to take back what is, and always should have been, Family Business.

Reclaiming Family Business.

I believe that there is 'Service Business' and 'Family Business'. Service business is the business of providing services; and Family Business governs how, when, why, and what level of service should be provided for a family member. Family Business is also the following:

- ◆ Daring to dream the seemingly impossible;
- ◆ Thinking lovingly, passionately, and intuitively about your son or daughter's life;
- ◆ Protecting the sacredness and privacy of family customs, culture and history;
- ◆ Espousing your son or daughter's beauty, gifts and talents.

And when your son or daughter cannot speak out for themselves:

- ◆ Ensuring that service providers meet his or her needs.
- ◆ Naming what is a good life for your son or daughter;
- ◆ Stating clearly what is negotiable or non-negotiable, what is acceptable or not acceptable. ▶

If you are spending all your energy trying to get services to do the right thing, being pleasant to service workers who disregard you, or generally trying to find out what-the-hell is going on, you

have lost control of what should be yours – Family Business.

Getting it back is tough. Keeping it once you have it back is also tough. However, families are doing it all the time and services, once they let go, realise that it works better when families have a say in what services do. Services also discover that when families signpost the way, there is a sense of continuity, fewer situations that turn into crisis, and less waste of time and money.

Stick to your message.

Once you are clear about your authority and your vision, you will need to stick to it. All manner of effort will be made to offer you a compromise that fits better with the service system. This can be stressful because your non-compliance may earn you the name of ‘trouble maker’, ‘unrealistic, or even ‘greedy’. The well-worn rules of action are relevant here: courtesy, truthfulness and tenacity. Because a symptom of the present service system is that staff come and go quickly, this labelling is not as damaging as it might otherwise be.

It is important to be sure that your message is, in fact, what you really want for your family member. Allies and trusted advisers can help you to double-check that what you are doing is the best way forward.

Find your allies.

There are people in service systems who do want to help families; they are usually long-term players and are skilled at minimising the effect of whatever management fad is in favour. They don’t break the rules but they do know how far

they can bend them. There are always loopholes and windows of opportunity when change is rife and your allies can tell you about them. They will also know other families who are thinking alike and where good things are happening. They can also warn you of the pitfalls.

Other families with the same vision as yours are important allies. It is here that ideas can be tested and modeled, using real experience and understanding. The synergy of a group of families is powerful and strengthening for each member. I believe that families do best when they join together. When you find your allies, listen to them – they may save you a lot of time and heartache.

Support people making change.

People with a disability, family members and workers have taken systemic action over the years to influence the service system to be more responsive to people with disabilities and their families. They sit on committees, write submissions, make deputations, and take legal action. It is very important that we support them.

It is almost certain that service systems and governments will become even more complex and technocratic over time, and that there will be ongoing changes and fads in management.

We cannot depend on some management technology, financial theory or restructure to bring sense to the service system. It will be the culmination of systemic and individual actions by concerned citizens, along with families and people with a disability, that will continue to call the service system to order. ■



Visions are creations of the heart as well as of the head. Visions are not about editing, withholding, or pleasing others. They are about authenticity and truthfulness. The enemy of vision is denial. Denial means avoiding issues, people, or circumstances. Denial means hoping not to disturb the status quo.

Al Etmanski

Contesting Technocratic Managerialism

Frank Stilwell is Professor of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. He is known for the social perspective that he brings to the study of economics, and in this article he unveils the severe shortcomings of technocratic managerialism with its language of science and economics.

We tend to meet any new situation by reorganising; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion and demoralisation.

Gaius Petronius Arbiter, AD 60

All organisations have to be managed. The process can be participatory or authoritarian, sensitive or insensitive, effective or ineffective. What is distinctive about modern technocratic managerialism is its tendency to disregard human values beyond those that directly influence ‘the bottom line’. Such corporate managerialism confronts us daily in diverse forms – in the workplace, in accessing social security benefits, and in health and education services. It embodies distinctive interests and values, prescribing particular practices and proscribing others. It is part of a political economic system that, despite its promises of greater economic efficiency and material well-being, is adding to the problems of economic insecurity, economic inequality, and the fracturing of social cohesion.

Some would say this is just ‘business as usual’ for the capitalist system. The assertion of managerial prerogatives is the most obvious expression of the non-symmetrical relationship between capital and labour. Historically, it has been manifest in the adoption of time-and-

motion study and other ‘scientific’ management, the use of machinery to dictate the pace of work (technical control) and diverse means of controlling employees through promotion procedures and career structures (bureaucratic control). The current Business School fashion for Human Resources Management is the latest ‘soft’ face of technocratic managerialism. All these management techniques fundamentally serve the same goals – maximum profits relative to labour costs.

What is perplexing is why technocratic managerialism has come to pervade the public sector and even the voluntary and community sector. This seems most clearly explicable in terms of the influence of so-called ‘economic rationalism’, which prioritises narrow economic criteria ahead of broader social goals for judging success. Whether ‘economic rationalism’ is rational is debatable. It is a viewpoint that is closely linked to the so-called corporate globalisation process. The commanding position enjoyed by multi-national corporations and international financial institutions has given rise to an increased concentration of economic power. These powerful institutions have vigorously promoted economic rationalist ideas that emphasise market freedoms. Their acceptance by bureaucrats and governments has led to important changes in the role of the state in many capitalist countries and this has paved the way for technocratic managerialism to be applied in the public sector as well as in the private sector.

Contemporary corporate managerialism can be interpreted in this context, not just as ‘business as usual’ for capitalism, but as a set of practices designed to integrate workers/citizens into these processes of global economic restructuring. These practices are a key part of the process of habituating the victims of structural economic change into acceptance of its necessity and desirability. All of this underpins the vigorous reassertion of managerial prerogatives.

Downsizing – the dominant corporate managerial fashion of the last decade – is a particular case in point. It has its own logic applied to the public sector as well as to business enterprises. In the public sector we must always use our collective resources wisely; the legitimacy of the system of taxation and public provision depends on it. Similarly, in voluntary agencies it is important to ensure the avoidance of waste and inefficiencies. If the opposite of downsizing is ‘feather bedding’, then it is hard to oppose downsizing in the name of efficient resource allocation. However, on closer examination this rationale for downsizing looks more shaky. First and foremost, it subordinates other social concerns to those that are narrowly economic. (One is reminded of the President of Brazil who once said, *The economy is doing fine but the people aren’t!*) In practice, the ‘lean and mean’ rhetoric is largely a smoke-screen for corporate greed, and the outcome is more typically institutions that are ‘fat and mean’.

One result of all this is a growing inequality in the distribution of income. Remuneration packages for chief executives have grown to bizarre proportions while, on the other hand, there has been a significant expansion of jobs with low or irregular pay. The proportion of people in part-time and casual work has risen sharply in the last two decades. This suits some people, but traps others in a situation of permanent insecurity; ‘flexibility’ is usually on employers’ terms. The result of all this is a tendency towards the development of the sort of ‘40:30:30’ society that journalist Will Hutton has described in the UK: approximately 40 per cent of the population are prospering from

technological progress, structural economic change and current managerial practices, while 30 per cent are battling to retain some sort of regular stake in the economy, and 30 per cent are more-or-less permanently marginalised from the mainstream of economic life. Technocratic managerialism, and downsizing in particular, is part of a broader process that constitutes, in effect, a renewal of the principles and practices of Social Darwinism: struggle for existence; and survival of the fittest.

What is the alternative? It would entail embracing policies that replace the climate of fear and insecurity in the workplace, and in society more generally, with more cooperative industrial relations and a more egalitarian income distribution. As I have argued in my latest book, nurturing, building and sharing could become the organising principles of economic life. This would be a reversal of the current technocratic managerial trend that emphasises surgery rather than massage, or dietary supplementation to heal the ailing economic patient. The alternative, to build on Australia’s potential comparative advantage in the pursuit of more balanced economic, social and ecological outcomes, would require more democratic and cooperative processes to shape our collective future. It is a big challenge. ■

[You can find Frank Stilwell’s latest book, *Changing Track: Towards a New Political Economic Direction for Australia* through Pluto Press. It was published in 2000]



Models and model building are really the micro-technologies that managerialism uses to turn arbitrariness into ‘givenness’ and actuality. They disempower reflection, they sterilize whatever is left of action-orienting traditions, and they irreversibly change the politics of reform by making system structures opaque.

Michael Pusey

BECOMING POWERLESS

I N THE CLIENT ROLE

Deborah Reidy is the director of Cornerstone in Massachusetts. In this article she points out that the role of 'client', which is often considered to be benign, actually has powerful negative effects for people who are already vulnerable.

In the last two decades, a model of management called technocratic managerialism has taken hold in human services. The nature of the technocratic managerial model can be found in the definition of the two words. 'Technocracy' is a social system in which scientists, engineers, and technicians have high social standing and political power; a philosophy that advocates the enlistment of a bureaucracy of highly trained technicians to run the government and society. 'Managerialism' is the application of the techniques of managing a commercial business to the running of some other organisation such as local government or public services.

Models are sets of ideas, images, beliefs and assumptions that we carry in our minds; they have a profound effect on how we perceive the world and ultimately on how we behave. Models are often taken for granted and unexamined by those who adhere to them, yet their impact on practices can be profound; they shape every aspect of practice, including how a problem is defined, what the possible remedies might be, and who is seen as the most qualified to offer remedies. As a way of illustrating this, contrast the names of two residential agencies: One is called *Services for Community Living*, an agency that was formed and named in the early 1980s; and the other, *Alliance for Resource Management*, is a residential agency operating in the present day. What does the name of each agency imply about the aim of the agency?

standardisation, uniformity, and cost containment? Most likely, they will be those in

From the perspective of the model of technocratic managerialism, as applied to human services, the problem or need is defined as being the efficient and economical management of services. Possible remedies then include standardisation, uniformity, and cost containment. The focus is on the *management* of the service rather than on the content and quality of the service; human beings become subordinated to processes. The following is a recent example.

A young man with cerebral palsy was unable to continue living at home with his family and was placed in a respite house near his family home where he lived for a number of months although respite houses are intended for short-term breaks. The young man's family was very involved in his life, visited regularly and invested a great deal of time working with staff to orient them to their son's needs. Although the situation was not ideal it was relatively satisfactory to the family. They were then told by the local government agency, which funded the service agencies that supported their son, that those services would no longer be available. The family was also told that their son would need to move out of the respite house within six weeks, although the government agency had no idea where the young man would be moving or what other agencies would now take over his support services. The family had no recourse in the matter because the changes were based on an administrative reason beyond their influence. The administrative reason was this: One agency had declined to 'bid' on the respite contract, which meant that they were going to lease the respite house to another agency that would be providing services to a different 'population' of people.

In this, and other examples of technocratic managerialism, we need to ask: Who are the people engaged to carry out the remedies of roles of administrator, bureaucrat, or some other functionary role that is content-free. They will

not necessarily be people with a background in human service provision because such people can actually be seen as being an impediment, likely to focus on the 'wrong' things, such as the needs of individual people.

In the technocratic managerialist model, the major role filled by those who receive services is that of 'client'. The client role is a relatively new one in an array of largely negative roles such as eternal-child, sick or dying organism, and burden, that have historically been filled by people with disabilities. The role of client, often considered to be benign, actually has powerful negative effects, including the following:

- ❖ Personal attributes take a backseat to generic characteristics; and scarcely anyone knows what is unique or special about the person who is the client.
- ❖ The client role passifies people, robbing them of the possibility to develop their unique gifts and talents.
- ❖ The locus of control lies outside the person: others know better; others are the experts.
- ❖ A predominant practice is that of fitting the person to processes, even when such processes are termed 'individualised' or 'personalised'.
- ❖ People spend a lot of their life being given remedial 'treatment' for not fitting in.

In the technocratic managerial model, it is almost impossible for people receiving services to fill any significant role other than that of client. This is why many attempts to help people break out of the client role are unsuccessful. If we understand the power of models then it is insufficient to attempt to change the roles that are filled by the individuals who are affected by the model, without changing the model itself. Although 'one person at a time' change-efforts are quite appealing, they seldom result in more than minor improvements in how a person is perceived.

I fear that the technocratic managerial model has yet to see its peak. Those who have concerns about the impact of this model on the lives of people receiving services might begin by thinking hard about the kinds of positive roles that those people might fill and then identify what beliefs, assumptions, support arrangements and models would best develop and sustain those roles. That way, we might stand a chance of designing systems that work for people, rather than the other way around.■



Much of what devalued people do is often done in the context of the clienthood role. Most needs are met by moving from one service to another. The role of human service client has a way of usurping the time and space available for other roles thereby decreasing opportunities for devalued people to take up or extend valued roles.

A Unique Life to Live

SOME BROAD STRATEGIES TO SHIELD PEOPLE FROM INVASIVE BUREAUCRACY

Recognising that services themselves struggle with Technocratic Managerialism, Michael Kendrick offers some broad strategies to organisations and workers who can become effective buffers against impersonal bureaucratic processes that intrude into the lives of the people they support. Michael is a regular contributor to CRUcial Times.

The growth of formal systems for providing services to millions of people in affluent societies has produced a rapid growth of organisations, systems, and bureaucracies. These vary in size from small to large and take on both governmental and non-governmental forms. The character and operating ethics of these systems vary widely as do the effects of their functioning on the people who are served. The processes of bureaucracy formation and growth have drawn the people served, and the people doing the serving, into endless encounters with bureaucracy that many believe to be fruitless and unnecessary for the actual conduct of services.

Often, the organisations involved act as if such encounters are benign or of no great consequence to the net quality of consumer or family experience, quite apart from that of their own staff. Nonetheless, many people are quite distressed by this phenomenon and have consciously been trying to discover ways of having services exist in such a way that the people served will have minimal bureaucratic encounters and a different kind of relationship with them. In other words, they want to create low-bureaucracy service models in which an ethic of ‘right relationship’ prevails.

Bureaucracy Minimisation. This goal can be accomplished by some rather obvious strategies. The first is simply that of devising ways of delivering services that minimise the total amount of bureaucracy that is required to operate the actual service. This approach does not equate to the entire elimination of bureaucracy, as desirable as that may be for some people. It simply means that the design of any bureaucratic functions are done in such a way that they go from ‘greater’ to ‘lesser’ bureaucracy in terms of the amount of bureaucracy. A simple example of this would be a reduction of paperwork, meetings, and other time involvements, particularly as they relate to the service user.

Reducing The Overall Invasiveness of Bureaucracy. This approach refers to the designing of bureaucracy so that it does not invade the life of consumers and families. In other words, the bureaucratic functions might still exist but they function outside the orbit of the people being served. This non-intrusive approach would require the recognition that there are domains which are best left untouched by bureaucracy if at all possible; domains such as one’s home, dreams, personal relationships, family life and so on. Nonetheless, the reduction of invasiveness does not necessarily mean that bureaucratic control over one’s life has ended or diminished, as its presence may be felt at other levels.

Challenging Bureaucratic Control and Domination Of People’s Lives. If bureaucracy were less controlling and imperial in its orientation to the lives of people, then it might even be possible to imagine bureaucracies acting in ways that were enabling, empowering, or even liberating to some degree. However, this polarity from greater to lesser levels of control over decisions affecting people’s lives is worthy of close examination. It may well be possible for many services to operate in a manner in which control is given back to people, both structurally and attitudinally, with all the advantages that may come with this new, right kind of relationship between the bureaucracy and the people that it ought to support. A good deal of this will hinge on how decisions are taken and how authority is shared with the people, or

whether that authority is held exclusively by those in bureaucracies.

Constructing Intentional Bureaucratic Shields, Buffers And Filters. This strategy refers to designing bureaucracy so that various firewalls or shields exist, or are specifically created to prevent the assertion of elements of bureaucracy over the lives of people. Shielding people from bureaucracy requires that there is a recognition of the type of bureaucratic influences that must be blocked, neutralised, or otherwise rendered to be less of a factor in the life of a person.

Paradoxically, the bureaucracy that is seen as being a danger may also play a role in limiting itself by agreeing to, or even pioneering, special features of itself that shield consumers from harmful or unhelpful aspects of its own functioning. For instance, it may establish rights and protocols for consumers that enable consumers to independently deny or thwart the bureaucracy when they feel in peril from it. In many jurisdictions, this 'shielding' is facilitated by the bureaucracy, ensuring that its users have a right to an advocate, and to the resources for challenging the bureaucracy. To some degree, such changes will help to more thoroughly balance the needs of the user against the assertions and claims of the bureaucracy.

Defining Social Ethics That Could Help Reduce The Toxicity Of Bureaucratic Functioning. It has already been indicated that there must be a search for, and upholding of, 'right relationship' ethics that serve as a kind of template or discipline for designing solutions and evaluating how things are working. This suggests that a kind of triage may be needed, particularly at the level of actually guiding values and principles (and the beliefs and assumptions that justify these), to help identify where the interests of service users are being most injured. When setting things right, the most toxic and damaging 'false ethics' that can be discerned should be given the most attention. For instance, the classic, kindly, self-congratulatory paternalistic attitude of many top-down organisations may be comparatively less noxious than would be the practice of inflicting brutal, punitive and abusive staff on vulnerable and defenceless clients. Both are detrimental and odious, but perhaps not entirely comparable in the harm that they cause.

In any case, all such instances of degradation of consumers would eventually need to be met by another orientation that fully remedies the underlying moral or ethical deficiency that produced the toxicity in the first place. For instance, the relief that is needed to free people from abusive staff tormenters would necessarily need to include bureaucratic measures that had the effect of creating the means to detect, filter out, reorient, or remove staff who might be unsuitable. A key ethic needed to achieve this would be that of the bureaucracy not designing services *for* people or on behalf of them, but rather designing services *with* people, in a manner in which every important decision would be jointly taken between the organisation and the consumer. *With-ness*, as a guiding social ethic, would be a far less dangerous approach than would be an uncritical reliance on the good judgement of the organisation when it came to the design of services.

Conclusion. The strategies presented here are not intended to be a detailed plan for tackling the issue of invasive bureaucracy, but they do represent a seminal basis for the consideration of theory and practice that might help to tame and re-align morally feral, unresponsive, and dysfunctional bureaucracy. They also hold out the hope that we might one day get much better at what it takes to have bureaucracy that is subordinate to, and enabling of, human well-being. Hence, the problem ought not to be construed as being the existence of bureaucracies, as these are both a necessary evil and an aid to our lives, rather, the question is the *kind* of bureaucracies that we allow to flourish. We most certainly need a different vision of the kind of bureaucracy that is the most compatible with service to people. ■

Discovering Unrecognised Gifts

Andrew Bligh lives in the Townsville community. When working with people, he likes to seek out the passion that is within each person for a particular interest, assisting the person to find an identity for themselves. His article shows what is possible when a worker, and the person who is supported, have a relationship, not just a set of rules.

Every individual has gifts – talents and contributions to make – that are often not found the first time we meet a person. Remember when you first met your friends or the people that you work with – do you value them differently now that you know them well? People with disabilities too have these gifts, talents and contributions to make, but they are often overlooked or not valued, and the human service systems that we work in often don't allow the time for these gifts to be discovered.

I am reminded of the story of a man who once sat alone in his flat with one chair, watching 'life' on television from within his four walls. He was a man who was strong of mind, body and hope but at the same time, felt weak from lack of opportunity to discover what it was that he sought from life. He had much to offer – but no one to offer it to.

He encountered a worker who saw his gifts of empathy, kindness, strength and enthusiasm. The worker had been prepared by the system to anticipate working with a man who was 'not smart' and supposed to be in need of great assistance to 'fit' into the community. The system had failed to take the time to find out about the real person within the man. Talking and laughing, the man and the worker discussed the endless possibilities of what could be, and the man hatched a plan. The man's plan included enhancing his physical strength at the local gym and his eventual progression to a high fitness water-sport that would require turning the disability-stereotype on its ear.

A local gym was found and the man put his plan to work. His strength increased as he demonstrated knowledge of the gym environment that others had been unaware he had. The man impressed others and made friends easily. They shared and appreciated his enthusiasm, and improved along with him. They responded to his openness and shared his world and their commonalities. The man was soon surrounded by people who wanted his time and knowledge, and sought his friendship.

But he was not content with what he had; he had merely become aware of what was possible. Instead of the easy option of what had been achieved so far, the man and the worker continued the plan to find the best in the man. Both were convinced there was more to be found and to become immersed in. This is where it led:

The team-sport of outrigger canoe paddling on open seas is a demanding, dangerous sport. It requires fitness, motivation and teamwork. The man with a disability who had sat alone in his flat is now sitting in an open canoe on the high seas, struggling against tide and tiredness. The man is battling demons of the mind and body that threaten to tear him and the rest of the crew apart. Only this man, his strength, newfound motivation and a willingness to contribute his enthusiasm will prevail. The man not only prevails but he also leads the team to winning more than just medals: the man wins self-belief, friendships and an affectionate nickname; he wins the right to belong to a group; to tell and share stories of the battle; and to bask in the warmth of achievement.

The man's friends tell of the time they battled neck-and-neck with a rival boat for five kilometers, slowly losing the fight. The strength was sapping from their muscles when a call came from the back of the boat. It was the man, firing them to struggle on. The battle is fought, words are screamed, and the man drives the crew to the finish. The battle is relived at a barbecue amongst friends. Each time the story is told, and with each drink that is shared, the distance of the race becomes longer, the fight harder, and the win more exhilarating. At dawn on a cold morning, the man strolls down to the beach, chats with other club members, and gathers the gear as the guys discuss the last party they attended together. They laugh at the things they did, the things they should have done, and the things that they'll do next time they are together.

The man no longer sits alone within his four walls – his friends won't let him, and his life does not allow it, nor does he want to sit alone. Now a valued club member, the man's previously unrecognised talents have become the fuel to propel him into his community of interest. The system may not have had the time to find the man's talents, but together, the worker and the man found and nurtured them, and now the man's community and his friends welcome those talents, and benefit from his enthusiastic contributions. ■