HARNESSING EFFECTIVE CONSUMER FEEDBACK

A number of agencies are incorporating formal quality assurance/certification and evaluation programs within their management frameworks, either voluntarily or in response to funding and legislative imperatives. In line with the *National Standards for Disability Services* there is increasing consumer-provider collaboration in the planning and monitoring of services. Both quality assurance and program evaluation aim for continuous improvement in the provision of services, at both the process and outcomes levels.   Quality assurance/certification programs seek consumer feedback from a range of perspectives and dimensions that differ from those gleaned via formal evaluation programs. Bringing the two measures together enhances the validity of the feedback gleaned and provides each agency with valuable insight as to how it can enhance its responsiveness to its client group. It also enables the agency to monitor its compliance to the National Standards as the range of indicators become more prescriptive.

National Standards for Disability Services

The National Standards prescribe the principles with which services must comply in the delivery of services to people with a disability. Whilst the principles are reasonably explicit, the implicit practice adopted by service delivery agencies varies quite significantly as it is subject to their interpretation and translation into agency policy and practice. It is becoming more and more evident that the 'interpretation' and scope of implementation of the principles correlates with the experiences of management and staff.

In the context of the standards and the philosophy of greater collaboration between consumers and providers the development of specific policies and procedures in line with each standard continues to be a first priority for service agencies. In order to validate the level of compliance some agencies have opted for independent certification processes which do meet this objective at the process level and to a more limited extent the outcomes level. In recent years the incentive for more in depth enquiry into qualitative compliance has emerged as the management system within an agency is perfected. For example in order for an agency to measure its compliance in *meeting individual needs; facilitating decision making and choice; and responding to consumer grievances/complaints* the following qualitative indicators are emerging:

- The extent to which all the relevant information is made available to people with a disability (or their carers) to enable them to make informed choices.
- The extent to which people with a disability (or their carers) are made aware of the full range of service alternatives.
- The extent to which people with a disability (or their carers) who have a limited exposure to services are encouraged to interact with other people with a disability (or their carers) who have experienced a range of other service alternatives.
- The extent to which a consumer is satisfied with the response of the agency in addressing grievance, complaints or concerns that arise out of system processes and service delivery methodologies.

In so far as disability services are striving to demonstrate the extent to which they are compliant predominantly via quality assurance/certification, the opportunity exists for formal evaluation programs to complement these systems by conducting in depth enquiries which ultimately harness effective consumer feedback. The effectiveness of consumer feedback is congruent with:

- the level of commitment, 'genuineness' and energy designated to the processes involving consumer interaction;
- the responsiveness of the service to the issues ultimately raised via these processes;

- consumer confidence that the agency will be accepting of negative as well as positive feedback and that it will endeavour to provide redress that is mutually acceptable.

Consumer Feedback Mechanisms

Quality Assurance

A range of consumer involvement and feedback mechanisms have been developed in the context of quality assurance as follows:

- Facilitating consumer input and/or comment on policy documents, agency plans and procedures.
- Including consumer representation on Boards of Management, Quality Committees and other key agency committees or forums.
- Including consumers on selection panels for staff.
- Conducting consumer satisfaction surveys.
- Delegating consultation processes to consumer driven sub-committees.
- Involving consumers in internal audit processes and organisational development training.
- Expanding processes to allow for interpersonal contact as opposed to the use of print media, e.g. forms, pro formas, etc.

This list is in no way exhaustive but it does highlight the more commonplace mechanisms. The emphasis of these mechanisms is in securing consumer feedback on agency systemic, operational and procedural issues. *Chart 1 (page 7)* highlights the typical interactions incidental to quality assurance.

Evaluation

Formal evaluation programs actively seek consumer feedback in the context of the program or activity which is the subject of the evaluation. Mechanisms used routinely in the course of evaluation include:

- Involving consumers in the review of personal service plans.
- Conducting one-to-one semi/structured interviews.
- Collating impromptu information that presents in the course of discussion.
- Involving significant others e.g. advocates, friends, relatives, etc.
- Facilitating participant observation.

The emphasis within evaluation processes is on the qualitative 'experiences' of those accessing a particular program or activity. *Chart 2 (page 7)* depicts the typical interactions involved in an evaluation process.

"Real" consumer feedback – positives and negatives

Consumer involvement in planning and operation of services has long been iterated in rhetoric surrounding service provision. One questions how fully this concept is implemented in practice. Real consumer participation facilitated via services will produce empowerment, a concept which embraces a critical balance of personal input, whilst allowing for support from others. A sense of personal control or empowerment encompasses a continuum which stretches from helplessness to self-determination, a process with increasing control over one's life (Davey, 1998). No person can empower another. One can only create a situation in which the opportunity for empowerment exists (Fulwood, 1993; Brown, 1997; Rappaport, 1994). Thus lies the challenge for service providers.

John O'Brien (1987) described five accomplishments as critical to quality of life, namely community presence, choice, competence, respect and community participation. Brown (1997) and Schalock (1997) stress the importance of choice and informed decision making. Schalock advises "redefining clients as customers and offering them choice' (Schalock, 1997, p.228). These indicators are integral to the Disability Services Standards and thus should be encouraged and facilitated in service provision.

Information regarding these indicators may be gained to some extent objectively but the most critical information must be obtained from the individual and his/her perception of these activities and relative satisfaction with each. Schalock refers to the importance of "person-referenced outcomes", thus acknowledging individual preference (Schalock, 1997, p.332). By designing a service in this way, the focus will be on the individual and the way he/she impacts on the service, rather than the service system impacting on the individual.

Barnes (1990) and Oliver (1993) have examined the scene in Britain where people with disabilities are viewed as adopting a 'dependency' role promoted by the service system, a situation which results in effective discrimination and 'disempowerment'. The dependency role is a barrier to autonomy and the development of individualised supports. Oliver (1993) points to the difference in perception of "independence" from the viewpoint of people with disabilities and able-bodied individuals. The latter may view independence as an ability to manage tasks on one's own, whereas Oliver perceives that people with disabilities view independence as a situation in which the individual has control and makes his/her own decisions. He tempers this with the fact that we all live in some state of interdependence where we rely on others to varying degrees. Oliver discusses the need for people with disabilities to genuinely participate in the control of adequately resourced agencies, to bear responsibility and to make their needs known. The extent of involvement of people with disabilities is a test of the agency's genuineness.

> "The creation of an infrastructure of state services which facilitate user choice and control (is) the only way in which dependency can be permanently removed (Oliver, 1993, p.59).

Situations should not exist where people with disabilities receive services which the service provider perceives as adequate, but rather the services which people with disabilities perceive as meeting their individual needs and desires. Consumer involvement at the individual level pertains to the setting of personally chosen and realistic goals, based on information, prior experience and choices. Achievement of these goals can only be assessed through the determination of consumer satisfaction at the individual level.

Consumers who do become involved in feedback mechanisms sometimes are confronted with 'hurdles' that emanate from the inflexibility of systems or a perceived lack of opportunity for flexibility within systems by service staff. The responsiveness of agencies is thereby dependent on the individuals with whom the consumers interact. Hence the practice intended by the agency must be explicit and promote flexibility within the agency's processes or prescribe the extent to which the agency will endeavour to respond to different circumstances.

The agency must be prepared to be flexible and respond in creative ways, to step outside the 'comfortable' boundaries of the more traditional forms of service provision, to try to respond to the individual's wishes, i.e. acknowledging individual preferences, and fostering 'real personal choice'. Of course, the agency must consider 'duty of care', but be prepared to consider the options open to the individual, and adopt the 'least restrictive alternative', in assisting choice, resulting in informed decision-making . This response is made easier at the 1:1 level of support person to consumer. After all the effective delivery of a 'human' service is dependent on an effective 'relationship' between a service provider and a consumer.

The agency can have more confidence in the response to the consumer if staff have received adequate training which incorporates the principles and objectives of the *National Standards*, the agency's philosophy and any standards relating to staff and consumer relationships within the service setting. Staff training plays an important role both in staff empowerment and their ability to respond to the person with the disability.   The agency can then have confidence in the viability of strategies devised by staff in conjunction with consumers to meet their desired outcomes.   Staff will also be inclined to think of strategies outside the more traditional pathways, if the agency is seen to openly promote these endeavours and support initiatives that evolve within this context.

Consumer Involvement in Agency Practice

Consumer involvement at the Board or Committee level of an agency would be enhanced through the provision of detailed background information, formal submissions and discussion of agenda items prior to the meeting. This briefing should match the consumer's preferred mode of communication, e.g. communication board, use of compix, use of layman's terms, etc. Outcomes should include skill development for the consumer and the facilitation of 'real' and 'valued' consumer contribution at the agency planning level. The agency must be prepared to allocate specific resources for this purpose, otherwise consumer involvement will be perceived by others as merely a 'token' gesture, and not a 'real' attempt to obtain consumer input. Parent feedback is often substituted for that of the actual consumer and whilst this is valuable, it must be realised that it is one step away from the individual who 'experiences' the direct relationship with the agency.

Consumers can be encouraged to actively take part in quality assurance monitoring processes by involving them in internal auditing or reviews of agency policies and program procedures. This will require a tailoring of the auditing process and particularly the language to encompass consumers' experiences and communication abilities. The level of agency input into consumer training is a test of the agency's 'genuineness' in encouraging, harnessing and valuing consumer feedback to determine the effectiveness of its service delivery and to plan for the future to ensure that it will meet its consumer group expectations. Encouragement from the agency acts as an incentive for other consumers to take part in monitoring and planning activities, where they see that the consumer contribution has been 'valued' and where it has effectively influenced the agency's service delivery practice.

Consumer feedback can be obtained at the individual level with respect to individual concerns and goals.   At a broader level, it may sometimes be more appropriate to utilise a consumer focus group. This may facilitate the development of new initiatives where consumers are afforded the opportunity to bring up new ideas, which are then discussed and debated within the group. Common concerns or criticisms may emerge amongst the group, or alternatively present as isolated cases. A focus group is an efficient and effective way of obtaining feedback from consumers who are able to communicate their views. Consumers who have more difficulty in conveying their ideas will require more in depth inquiry and use of other techniques such as participant observation may be warranted. If the agency is genuinely concerned with consumer feedback, then it must be prepared to apply adequate resources and be flexible in the range of mechanisms it implements to obtain this information.

The following situations may arise if the agency does not allocate sufficient resources, time and energy into strategies to bring about effective consumer feedback or wavers in its commitment to take 'on board' all feedback both positive and negative:

➢ Board and committee meetings at various levels of the agency may lack an experienced facilitator, who will allow extra time for explanation of matters arising during the meeting. This coupled with insufficient preliminary information will severely limit a consumer's ability to contribute effectively to the decision making of the group;

- The impact of the recent changes to the corporate governance legislation and in particular the implications for all Board members could be perceived as a reason for precluding people with disabilities from these forums;

- The limited use of mechanisms to harness consumer input which constrain the 'empowerment' of consumers in giving honest feedback from a range of perspectives. There is a danger of cultivating an attitude where consumers are made to feel they should be grateful to receive support;

- Superficial valuing of consumer feedback is soon detected by a person external to the program, where service responses do not correlate to consumer concerns. In this case, an independent evaluator is valuable in assessing consumer satisfaction, in conjunction with consumer outcomes;

- Lack of flexibility in strategies to respond to consumers' goals will stifle consumers' willingness to contribute, as they perceive a culture of resistance to change or implicit inflexibility on the part of the agency;

- Consumers' previous experiences will colour their perceptions of agency responses to their input, and impact on their preparedness to give realistic feedback.

Qualitative Evaluation

From the outset an agency needs to explore the consumer's expectations in accessing its services. A number of agencies are formulating introductory pamphlets, service contracts or variations thereof. This approach does provide the opportunity for potential consumers to be made aware of the range of services and the manner in which they could expect them to be provided by the agency whilst prescribing what might be expected of the consumer by the agency. The interaction between the consumer and the agency is thereby no different to the interaction between a commercial entity and potential customers. However, given the 'human' nature of disability services, the likelihood of an ongoing relationship and the impact on the consumer's lifestyle, the assessment of the interaction from time to time whilst the relationship continues is crucial, e.g. regular goal plan reviews should be conducted by each service team. Formal evaluation programs will enable the agency to check not only how the relationship is going from the consumer's perspective but to also test the agency's fulfilment of consumer expectations through an assessment of consumer outcomes. Such formal evaluation programs are best carried out by a person who is independent of the area of service delivery, whether internal or external to the agency. This should enable the consumer to express their satisfaction without worrying about any impact on their relationship with the persons involved in their service delivery. This approach allows for the consumer to dictate the indicators that he/she believes to be the most important to him/her, with the confidence that the agency concerned will deliver a service which is clearly within their control.

As a further dimension is added to the gathering of information through participant observation of interactions between support persons and consumers and their various activities, this lends further credence to the data gathered from interviews with consumers and significant others in their support network *(see Chart 3, page 8)* This type of information would not normally be gathered within the realms of quality assurance, and would occur through targetted evaluation.

The challenge for the evaluator is to identify the original indicators that were of importance to the consumer(s) and what is needed to empower the consumer(s) to provide 'honest' feedback. The fact that the evaluator is testing benchmarks set by the consumer from the outset should enhance the confidence of the consumer in providing effective responses to the lines of enquiry included in the evaluation. The evaluator will also need to be alert to indicators which might emerge from the perspective of the consumer who has been receiving services from the agency concerned.

Future Initiatives

Given the challenges for agencies to ensure that they are in 'tune' with their consumers along with the ongoing funding and legislative imperatives, the following initiatives are indicated:

➢ Allocation of sufficient resources to facilitate consumer education to enable them to ensure there is adequate information available to assist them in decision making at committee meetings, and training materials to facilitate consumer participation in internal auditing of an agency's procedures or process.

➢ Fostering a culture within the agency which encourages consumer feedback so that consumers feel 'empowered' and 'valued' and monitoring the agency's achievement in this context.

➢ Complement ongoing grievance and complaint processes with formal evaluation where issues or concerns are evident.

➢ Recognition of the necessity for inclusion of evaluation in the formal feedback mechanisms operating within an agency.

➢ Exploring qualitative and 'experiential' issues with consumers via independent evaluation processes.

➢ Recognition of the need for consumer feedback at a number of levels within the agency as an integral part of improvement to service delivery. Semi-structured interviews with consumers, significant others in the consumer's support network, in conjunction with participant observation make for a more reliable and valid determination of the effectiveness of service delivery from the consumer's viewpoint.

➢ Recognition of the importance of staff training in the principles underlying service delivery.

➢ Encouragement of flexible thinking, and creative strategies for the implementation of service delivery as an integral part of a changing culture within the agency.
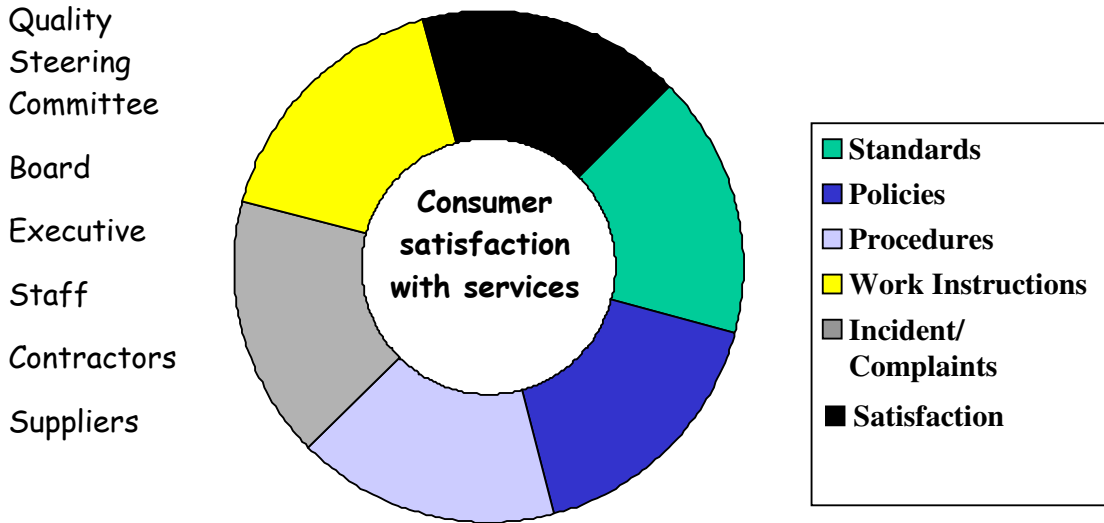
Conclusion

The measure of 'real' and 'honest' consumer feedback is necessary for an agency to remain in tune with its consumer group. Nonetheless an agency must be mindful that the feedback can be less effective if the agency 'overkills' the regularity and range of mechanisms it uses for this purpose. Experience has shown that where management systems provide the opportunity for grievances, complaints and system deficiencies to be highlighted as a matter of course and the issues have been mutually resolved, the conduct of formal reviews or evaluation should be set at intervals of two or more years. Where the review processes have complemented the management system within timeframes shorter than this the staff, consumers and carers have become complacent about the process, seen it more as a chore and have worked through the process as quickly as possible. The effectiveness of the feedback in these circumstances has been somewhat diminished. The conduct of formal evaluations for the specific purpose of making in depth inquiries about the consumer's experience in accessing services enables the agency to target the activities it may sense require this level of review and to maximise the use of its resources in seeking effective consumer feedback. *Chart 4 (page 8)* depicts the ideal consumer perspective within the agency's processes aimed at continuous improvement in the delivery of services to people with disabilities. The integration of quality assurance and formal evaluation can harness effective consumer feedback and reinforce the pivotal role of the consumer in shaping the services he/she chooses to access.

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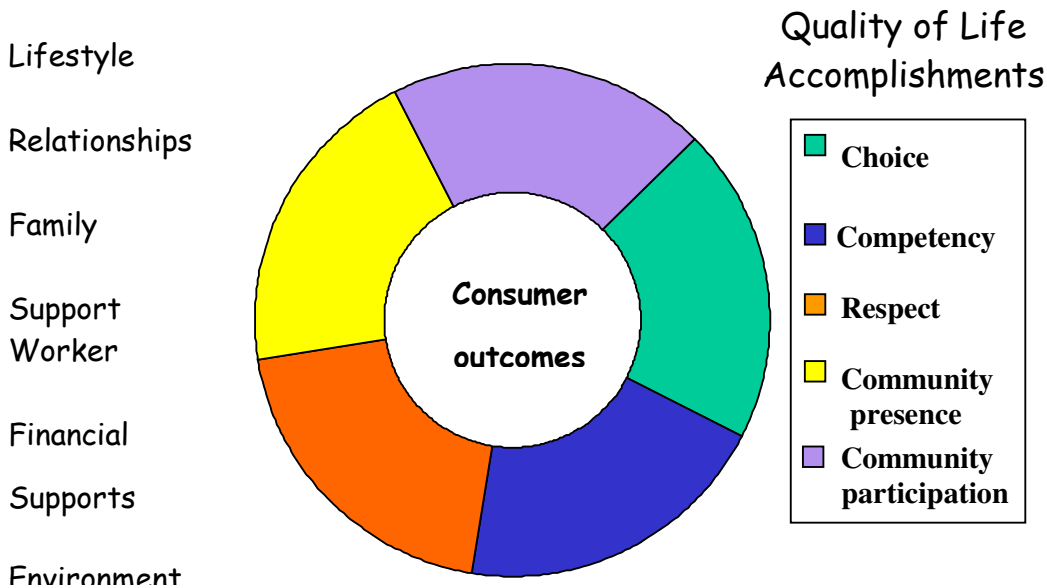
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CHART 1 – TYPICAL QA INTERACTIONS

Quality
Steering
Committee

Board

Executive

Staff

Contractors

Suppliers

Consumer satisfaction with services

- 🟩 **Standards**
- 🟦 **Policies**
- 🟪 **Procedures**
- 🟨 **Work Instructions**
- ⬜ **Incident/ Complaints**
- ⬛ **Satisfaction**

AUDITOR - staff interviews, desktop reviews, site visits

CHART 2 – TYPICAL EVALUATION INTERACTIONS

Lifestyle

Relationships

Family

Support
Worker

Financial

Supports

Environment

Quality of Life
Accomplishments

Consumer outcomes

- 🟩 **Choice**
- 🟦 **Competency**
- 🟧 **Respect**
- 🟨 **Community presence**
- 🟪 **Community participation**

EVALUATOR - participant observation and interviews

CHART 3 – ENHANCED CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT LOOP

Essential Component
-Consumers/
family feedback
on effectiveness of service delivery

EVALUATION

CONTINUOUS
IMPROVEMENT
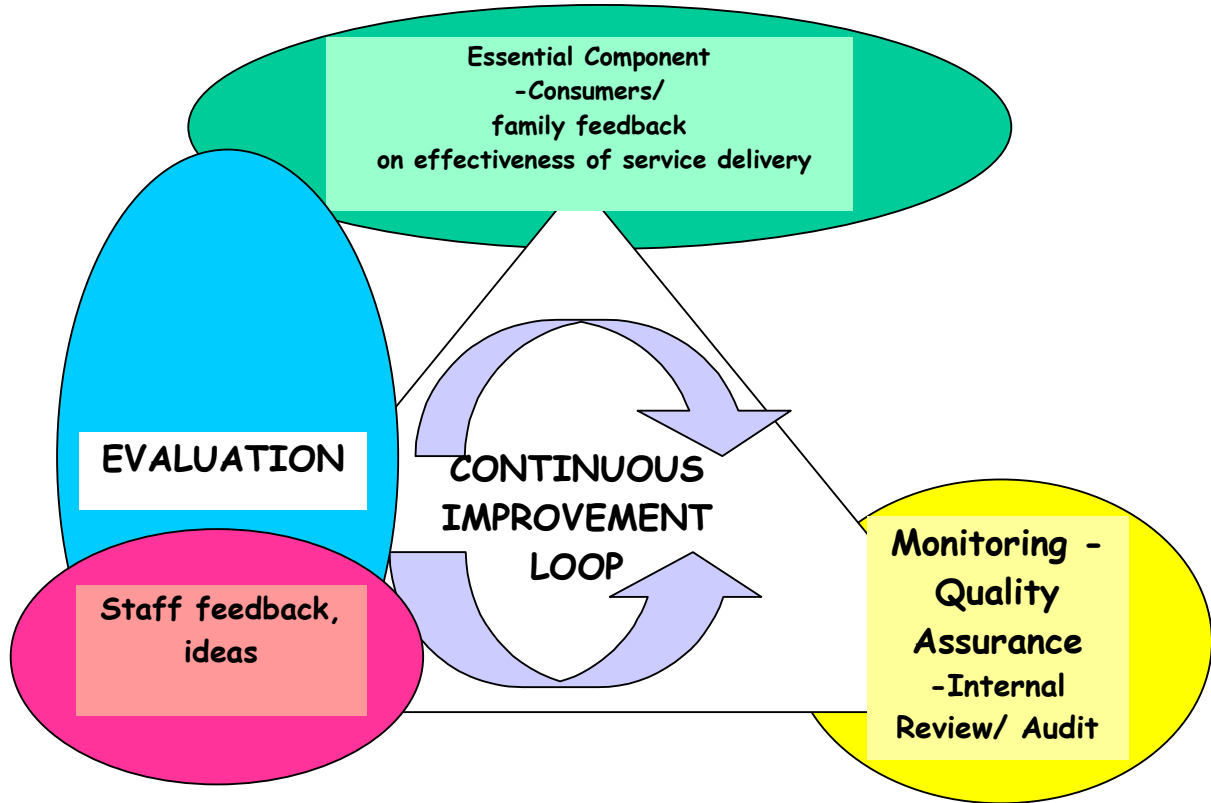LOOP

Staff feedback,
ideas

Monitoring –
Quality
Assurance
-Internal
Review/ Audit

CHART 4 SERVICE PLANNING & OPERATION

Agency Flexibility

Agency Planning

Informed Decision-
making by
consumer

Consumer
responsibility

Information to
consumer