

Human Services

CHANGING LANGUAGE – CHANGING CONCEPTS?

In June I was invited to give the opening address at the national conference of the Queensland Creche and Kindergarten Association. When reflecting on the theme of the conference, ‘Children: investment or commodity or . . . ?’, I found myself contemplating also the extent to which, over the past decade or so, public discourse on issues of social policy and social welfare has tended to be couched in concepts introduced from the economic domain.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the readiness with which the language of industry has achieved acceptance as an appropriate code in which to discuss what, not so long ago, would have been talked about as human or social services. Thus, what were previously known as child care or aged care *services* are now referred to by policy makers and by service providers in community and private sectors as the child care and aged care *industries*.

Do changes like these simply reflect fluctuations in linguistic fashion, a mere switching of labels? Or, alternatively, is the ‘industrialisation’ of public discourse on human services providing yet another illustration of the power of language to shape the way we think about social issues?

Speaking about an activity or a set of related activities as a service gives primacy to the needs and interests of the client group for whom the service has been developed and to the role of the service in meeting those needs and serving those interests. On the other hand, labelling the same activities as an industry seems to shift the focus away from the needs and interests of clients, towards the economic aims of the activities and upon the principles

and processes which are elaborated in the service of these aims.

In contemporary terms and values the principal economic objective of any industrial enterprise is profitability. First and foremost industries are profit making enterprises; the creation of profit is their *raison d’être*. Thus, independent of the particular product involved, the principal objective of any given industrial enterprise will be the efficient manufacture or development of a commodity or service that can be profitably marketed against competing alternatives.

‘Efficiency’, ‘profitability’ and ‘marketability’ are key concepts and are highly inter-dependent. Marketability and profitability can be simply defined, at least for present purposes. The former refers to the ease with which potential users can be enticed to purchase the product, while the latter, profitability, refers to the balance between the total unit costs of production and distribution on the one hand and the selling price on the other. Efficiency refers to the objective to contain unit production and distribution costs at their lowest possible level commensurate with the ‘acceptability’ of the end product to the customers for whom it is intended. Acceptability to potential customers will be governed, above all else, by considerations of ‘quality’ and ‘price’. Price and quality are highly correlated; other things being equal, increase in the quality of a product entails an increase in cost to the producer and therefore an increase in price to the customer.

At a practical level, with respect both to goods and services, quality can most generally be defined as referring primarily to

fitness for purpose, to the expectation, for example, that within the tolerances of an agreed set of specifications, a product will properly fulfil the purpose for which it is intended. With respect to *manufacturing industry* – where tangible products can be counted, weighed, tested for strength and the like – quality parameters can usually be specified and measured with relative objectivity and effective quality assurance and control procedures established on that basis.

The products of *service industries* – such as transport, finance, tourism or catering – are frequently less tangible than those of manufacturing industry. Thus, although the fitness for purpose principle still obtains, quality considerations apply more to consumer satisfaction with ‘process’ aspects of service delivery and use or consumption. With respect to outputs, therefore, in contrast to manufacturing industry, quality in service industries has an increased subjective dimension and is more difficult to specify, measure and control. Accordingly, agreement over the definition of quality in the context of service industries will be facilitated by clarity of understanding between producer and customer as to the purpose a product is intended to serve. Clear specification of purpose, in turn, will facilitate agreement between producer and customer over criteria to be used to determine quality and over the relevance of any quality control procedures adopted.

From the perspective of industry, whether service or manufacturing, issues of quality are of concern primarily to the extent that they affect marketability; the focus is upon achieving a level of quality at which, for a given price, potential customers are prepared to purchase the product. Once that level of quality has been identified, any quality assurance and control procedures that may be established are there primarily in the interests of the producer, since the principal

function of such strategies is to maintain efficiency and marketability through minimising the wastage associated with defective or otherwise unacceptable products.

In manufacturing industry considerations of efficiency clearly provide producers with material incentives to engage in effective quality assurance and control. At a formal level, similar incentives should apply in service industries also. In practice, however, because service products are less tangible than manufactured goods, fitness for purpose can be more difficult to determine and assess; quality, in consequence, becomes more ephemeral, complex and disputatious to measure. In addition, these same factors can render it more difficult for service industry customers to be aware of the level of quality reasonably to expect from service industry providers or to detect when quality may, in fact, be compromised in favour of efficiency or related considerations.

It was recognition of the complexity and potential ambiguity over quality matters in a service industry context that, in part, led to the development of the so-called *Citizens' Charters* in the United Kingdom during the earlier years of this decade and, more recently, to the requirement for Commonwealth agencies in Australia to develop and publish *Service Charters*. The appointment, both here and overseas, of industry regulators to perform a watchdog role with

respect to now privatised, but previously publicly owned, utilities has been similarly motivated.

From a *human service* perspective, in contrast to the perspective on quality adopted by industry, issues of quality are of concern primarily to the extent that they impact upon the interests and wellbeing of the client group involved. The fitness for purpose principle continues to apply but the purpose is clearly articulated in terms of what is in the clients' best interests.

On this basis, commensurate with the resources available to the service agency, an appropriate service response is identified. The quality of that response is then assessed as the match between clients' defined interests and the level of service achieved; the degree of any mismatch can then act as an incentive for quality improvement.

Considerations of efficiency are of concern as much to service agencies as they are to service industries, particularly in terms of achieving value for money and avoiding waste, but the criteria by which efficiency is assessed refer once more to impact upon client wellbeing rather than to profitability.

The purpose of this analysis is not to extol the virtues of public or community provision of human services over provision by private practitioners, whether for profit or otherwise. Nor is it to be dismissive of the

crucial importance of manufacturing and service industries in creating the wealth on which our capacity to resource human services depends.

Rather, it is to raise questions about the degree to which the best interests of the client groups who are users of human services may be compromised by the wholesale adoption of an industrial or commercial orientation to service provision.

Service agencies may have much to learn from industry and commerce about financial and human resource management that could enable them to serve better the needs of their clients. However, adapting from industry practices which can enable agencies to deliver a better service to clients does not necessarily entail the introduction of the economic objectives of industry into human service delivery.

Embracing the language of industry has the potential to introduce into service provision, whether wittingly or not, concepts and values that are out of harmony with the concerns of providers – whether from public or private sectors – to promote the best interests and wellbeing of their clients.



Youth Suicide Prevention

Institute's role in new National Communications Strategy

'Suicide is a tragic event. It has a profound personal effect on all associated with the person who dies. Families, friends, and indeed society as a whole are affected. There is a particular poignancy when the suicide is that of a young person at the threshold of adulthood.'

—Youth Suicide in Australia: A Background Monograph (2nd edn), published by the Mental Health Branch of the Department of Health and Family Services (AGPS, Canberra, 1997).

Australia's rate of youth suicide compared to that of other world countries is in the very high range, and for every completed suicide there are many attempts. The Commonwealth Government has responded to the issue through the commitment of resources to an integrated range of programs under the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. The Strategy is aimed at establishing and encouraging best practice in identifying and treating suicidal behaviour in young Australians, and at ensuring that interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective are incorporated into the regular programs of health, welfare, education and other agencies.

Lack of readily available information on prevention programs and activities has been identified as a major factor inhibiting effective action in the field of youth suicide prevention. Prevention strategies are most effective when people know about them and can access and adapt models which are already in place and working well.

As part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Commonwealth Government Department of Health and Family Services has engaged the Australian Institute of Family Studies to address the information and communication needs of those involved in youth suicide prevention.

Accordingly, over the next two years, the Institute, helped by the Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria, will engage in the following activities.

Stocktakes of prevention activities

In collaboration with the Institute, state and territory health and community services departments will be

undertaking two stocktakes of youth suicide prevention activities within their jurisdictions. The Institute will compile a database of related activities by the Commonwealth, non-government and private sectors. The results of these stocktakes will be consolidated by the Institute for distribution via printed and electronic media. The results of the first stocktake will be available in January 1998, and the second in June 1999.

Analysis of information needs

Between June and October 1997, the Institute will carry out a survey and an analysis of the information and communication needs of practitioners, researchers and policy makers working in the field of youth suicide prevention.

Development of a communications strategy

Informed by the outcomes from the activities described above, the Institute will develop a communications strategy, to be implemented between January 1998 and June 1999. As part of the strategy, the Institute will organise and support a range of activities designed to (i) provide information about and encourage the uptake of successful models of suicide prevention, and (ii) provide information about relevant research projects and findings.

Evaluation of prevention programs

The Institute will undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the Commonwealth's National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. It is expected that the results of the evaluation will be published in June 1999 together with a report on the effectiveness of the entire communications strategy.

How You Can Become Involved

Readers with an interest in or professional connection with youth suicide prevention are invited to contact the Institute for further details about the National Communications Strategy.

Questionnaire

The Institute is currently collecting information for the first stocktake of prevention activities. If you are involved in youth suicide prevention and would like to have your activities included in the stocktake publications, please contact the Institute's Family Information Centre to arrange for a questionnaire to be mailed to you.

Mailing list

If you would like to be included on the mailing list to receive printed materials and other outputs from the communications strategy, please contact the Institute's Family Information Centre.

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