

Editorial: Groupwork in management and organisational change

As I climbed the greasy pole of higher education management to become head of a multidisciplinary school of applied social sciences, I attended a number of courses on organisations, management and leadership. These complemented my day to day practical learning. Reflecting on both the theory and my experience, I became increasingly aware that my knowledge and, hopefully, skills as a groupworker were central to the seeming new world I was inhabiting as a manager. Much of the training seemed to be about groupwork framed within an alternative terminology. Indeed, the names of primary authorities – Kolb, Lewin, Tuckman – were remarkably familiar!

In a seminal paper in an earlier edition of *Groupwork*, Pam Trevithick (2005, p.99) argues that

groupwork's knowledge base is not only relevant for running groups but provides a conceptual framework from which to understand the dynamics, developments and processes involved in other aspects of practice. For example, if we look at ... work with organisations, an understanding of groupwork theory and practice is directly relevant.

It was this thinking that sparked the idea of calling for contributions to a special edition of *Groupwork* on management and organisational change. That this struck a chord elsewhere was evidenced by the speed with which I received offers of papers. A selection of these have been fully developed and are now presented in this issue of the journal.

However, besides providing some relief that my thoughts and plans were not entirely idiosyncratic, these offers also highlighted another

aspect of groupwork and, indeed, a prime feature of this journal, which had not then been at the forefront of my intentions: their multi-professional and interdisciplinary characters. The proposals revealed the capacity of groupwork theory and practice to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to reach into a range of professional areas not usually regarded as groupwork territory. When viewed through the lenses of organisational and management issues and practices, groupwork knowledge and expertise have striking and productive contributions to make.

The first article, by Jerome Carson and Paul Dennison, tackles the issue of occupational burnout. This is a concern for managers as it impacts on the quality of client care. They describe two contrasting approaches that used groupwork to tackle the problem of staff stress and burnout in mental health workers. The first used three-day self-esteem workshops; the second staff support groups, employing a psychodynamic approach. Both approaches, it is argued, demonstrated merits as well as limitations. As burnout is essentially a negative concept, it is argued that there should be increased focus on what might prevent burnout arising in the first place and on developing alternative approaches based on positive psychology. It is suggested that attachment theory offers useful insight into what may be happening in burnout and that it may be more fruitful to help staff connect with their strengths and to assist them find evidence of their personal effectiveness at work. Groupwork provides a productive medium for such support to be offered.

Ivan Gray and his colleagues from Bournemouth University address the impact of the introduction of a modernising agenda to social services, which has increased managerial approaches to the organisation, development and delivery of services. Recognising that this has not been popular and is seen as a threat by many in social work, they argue that social workers must find ways of working within the new agenda to uphold the values and cultural heritage of social work. They promote a 'communities of practice' approach and the development of 'learning organisations' as offering real opportunities to build bridges between managerialism and a participatory approach to social care. Groupwork theory and expertise, they argue, dominate the repertoire of values, understanding and skills that the leaders of learning organisations and communities of practice would require.

This highlights, they point out, the need for an explicit integration of groupwork into social work degree courses, the post qualifying leadership and management pathway and in-house training.

David Robotham looks at groupwork from a human resource management perspective, recognising that groups are a central component of any organisation and so having an understanding of the ways they function is important for any member of an organisation. He provides an overview and critical evaluation of how thinking on groups within organisations has emerged and developed. He explains how groups develop, and considers whether the emergence of teams in organisations represents a shift in thinking, or only represents a renaming exercise. Interestingly, he points up the possible negative sides of groups in the forms of 'groupthink', when a group will stick to a particular group decision even though it is not working, and of crowd behaviour, when the better judgement of the individual can become submerged under the collective mind of the crowd. In relation to teamwork as a taken-for-granted good, he draws attention to suggestions that, as a concept imported from Japan, copying such an approach to work design may be failing to take into account cultural differences and may be alien to the Western conception of work which stresses individual rewards based on individual performance.

David Henchman and Sue Walton are freelance training consultants. Their article describes a model which they have developed for helping team leaders to address problematic behaviour at work. They illustrate the application of the tools and structures comprising the model and explain the cognitive behavioural and groupwork theories which underpin their methods. The article demonstrates how team leaders can be empowered to use their existing managerial skills, knowledge and experience with confidence. Firmly grounded on groupwork, application of the model enables them to address problematic behaviour proactively and routinely rather than going down a costly route of formal procedures. As a consequence, they argue, this reduces the amount of their time spent on stressful procedure and enables them and their team members to work towards achieving the aims of the organisation.

Introducing a completely different professional and disciplinary area to this collection of articles, Pam Ward, a practising dentist and part-time small group facilitator at a dental school, considers the

significance for dentists of working in small groups. She advocates the importance for modern dentists, as students, practitioners, team leaders and organisational players, of learning about groups and groupwork. Focusing on the ways, often implicit, that this might develop, she shows how learning can begin during training but may continue throughout a dentist's career. She explores, firstly, the possible impact on dental students of working within enquiry-based learning groups and, then, how dentists may mobilise groupwork in later professional activities. She makes a case for the use of groupwork knowledge and skill in many areas within the rapidly changing world of contemporary dentistry.

In the final article, Tracey Williamson, a Research Fellow at Salford University, describes and discusses the findings of her action-research into group decision-making within a model of 'shared governance' developed in a hospital and community NHS Trust. She explains that, through the operation of multidisciplinary groups of staff known as 'councils', the shared governance approach aims to empower nurses and other health care workers to have authority for decisions concerning their practice and to work collectively to realise shared goals. Within the Trust studied, the effectiveness of the councils varied, enabling aspects of the group decision-making processes to be highlighted and contextualised within established management, shared governance and group dynamics theory. Eight key factors affecting decision-making and four supportive conditions are identified and incorporated into a conceptual model. The presence of these factors was found to be necessary but not sufficient to enhance decision-making.

I began this project and, indeed, this editorial speculating whether the relationship of groupwork to management and organisational change might be a case of the same wine in different bottles: the replication of the same knowledge and skills albeit within different academic and professional contexts and discourses. Clearly this is not the case. The articles selected for this issue demonstrate, instead, the subtleties and complexities of a close and interweaving relationship in theory and in practice. They reinforce the importance of groupwork, firstly, as a discipline which can beneficially inform and influence professional practice across other settings and disciplines to maximise opportunities for change, growth and development (Trevithick, 2005, p.102) and, secondly, as signifying a culture that sets, above all else,

human rights, personal dignity and democratic participation as core values.

Reference

Trevithick, P. (2005) The knowledge base of groupwork and its importance within social work. *Groupwork*, 15, 2, 80-107.

Dave Ward
Guest Editor