

Abstract

Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) aims to reduce re-offending by individuals who are under its supervision or in its custody. It seeks to do this by building capacity in the development, delivery and evaluation of programs that target factors known to be actuarially associated with offending behaviour. The role of the specialist Program Facilitator is vital in maintaining, and effectively delivering quality programs throughout the Service. There is an increasing body of evidence supporting the position that evidence-based, well delivered programs are effective in creating behaviour change. This has seen the development of specialist Program Facilitators who have a combination of training, experience and personal attributes that facilitate the therapeutic alliance with program participants to support behaviour change. This paper seeks to highlight the value of the trained facilitator within CSNSW. It explores the role of the facilitator as an agent to ensure program integrity and therapeutic process and to provide a framework for mentoring and support. The authors, both program facilitators, explore the leverage for change that can be effected in program delivery through having staff that can take on a mentoring and consultative relationship. This is especially with colleagues responsible for the supervision of offenders. The authors conclude that trained Specialist Program Facilitators add considerable value to service delivery in often difficult settings throughout the Service.

Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) aims to reduce reoffending by individuals who are in custody or who are under its supervision. It seeks to do this by building capacity in the development, delivery and evaluation of programs that target factors known to be actuarially associated with offending behaviour and reduce recidivism (Corrective Services NSW ‘Accreditation, Strategic Framework’ 2005). Evidence has slowly accumulated to support the position that treatment programs do indeed ‘work’ (Day and Howells 2002). CSNSW like many Western correctional agencies have shifted their focus from incarceration towards providing effective offence based programs as part of their core business to ensure a higher quality approach to offender management.

Morgan and Winterowd (2002) also suggest that group treatment programs offered to offenders to effect behavioural change do work. In spite of societal beliefs, research is proving that this form of intervention is superior to punishment versus incarceration alone.

Interpersonal, process orientated group programs offer several treatment advantages for offender populations (Yalom 1995). This has been explored further by Morgan and Winterowd (2002) who claim that as a result of participation in a therapeutic group program, offenders potentially related better with others, tended to take more responsibility for their own behaviour and moved closer to acceptance of
societal expectations of pro-social behaviour.

In 2004 CSNSW, through the establishment of the Offender Programs Unit took up the challenge of reviewing their suite of programs, as well as the way in which these programs were being delivered throughout the state in both custodial settings and in the Community Offender Services (COS).

As a result of the research and evidence supporting specific program delivery and therapeutic group work practice, CSNSW introduced positions within the Offender Services and Programs Branch that were designated as specialist Program Facilitators. This was initiated along with a staff development plan that emphasised training initiatives related to program accreditation (CSNSW Accreditation Strategic Framework 2005). The position of specialist Program Facilitator was designed mainly to provide a dedicated staff member whose role was to deliver programs and ensure program integrity. This paper argues that the role of the specialist Program Facilitator has since evolved and now provides greater value across many different aspects of offender management, rehabilitation and staff mentorship. Facilitators provide a combination of training expertise and personal attributes that together offer superior program integrity and therapeutic process. They adhere to a strict framework of standardised program delivery and are provided with ongoing clinical supervision and training in group work practice.

Skill sets and attributes

The specialist Program Facilitator brings to the equation his/her extensive understanding and experience underpinned with a strong theoretical framework. These inform both the educational content and therapeutic process of each program he/she delivers. Facilitators must be able to process information, deliver accurate educational content along with observing, recognising and responding to intragroup relationships as they unfold. The facilitator’s ability to think, link, reflect and act within the context of program activities is fundamental to the therapeutic process both for offenders and co-facilitators.

While focused on group process, a facilitator needs to be able to assume a position of inquiry and curiosity (or ‘not knowing’) to provide the best environment for exploring issues within a group. This position of ‘seeking to find out’ reaffirms and expands the understanding and potential of others. Bunston, Pavlidis and Leyden (2010) suggest this acquiring this skill set is a hard development task for those charged with the responsibility of maintaining group process. It also begins to justify the position of a specialist Program Facilitator whose training requires the acquisition and ongoing development of this skill.

The authors will explore in this paper the value of the specialist Program Facilitator by identifying key skills sets and personal qualities essential in the development, delivery, evaluation and progression of effective programs for offenders. The authors believe that the process of providing meaningful programs that can initiate behavioural change and ensure successful program outcomes, involves more than being effective in the group room. It requires the specialist Program Facilitator to operate in parallel processes of communication and interactions with management, custodial and community offender services, along with offenders and those who supervise them.
This conviction instils ‘hope’ that an offender can gain the confidence and belief that the program will in some way help his/her current situation by effecting change (Yalom 1995).

The specialist Program Facilitator who recognises the barriers and challenges to program delivery often approaches this task with ‘possibility thinking’. By adopting a ‘can do’ mindset around the importance of offence-targeted programs they provide consistent strategies in offender management. This ensures that programs remain a priority in the areas they service. Often it is their ability to continually work with a focus on finding solutions when working across layers of resistance that provide a model to other staff and reinforce the commitment of CSNSW to deliver effective offence-targeted programs.

As a result of a more intimate understanding of an offender’s issues developed within the group process, the specialist Program Facilitator is sought after for consultation by staff and management in providing alternative strategies and approaches to address behaviour change. Initiated through program delivery, it provides important feedback and recommendations for ongoing treatment and case management. Another significant benefit of the feedback process can be a more effective working relationship with co-facilitators (usually Probation and Parole Officers). While supporting new skills development, these professional interactions also provide a safety net for others involved with program delivery, allowing them to take appropriate professional risks and to advance their own learning and confidence.

The specialist Program Facilitator is responsible for ensuring program integrity. As such, he/she becomes the ‘anchor’ that provides a consistent and reliable approach to program delivery and ensures a therapeutic alliance is created across all parallels within the organisation. They support the evaluation of program effectiveness by providing a conduit where information travels many ways between stakeholders and responsible parties.

**Training**

Corrective Services NSW have demonstrated a commitment to provide specialist Program Facilitators with competencies, qualifications and resources necessary to effectively deliver programs. Program staff charged with these responsibilities receive regular professional supervision by a qualified and appropriately experienced practitioner to monitor and enhance therapeutic skill development and program integrity. Bieschke, Matthews and Wade (1996) suggest that the training of group facilitators needs to be an evolving process with rigorous and innovative practice in group work. There should be a balance between both experiential and didactic methods of training to mature the highly competent group work facilitator. CSNSW requires the specialist Program Facilitator to complete program specific training, at a basic, intermediate and advanced levels including a tertiary level course run in collaboration with Macquarie University. This requirement is the minimum standard for all specialist Program Facilitators in CSNSW and establishes a standard of reflective practice and experiential learning that embeds core skills while demanding a high level of professional practice in group work facilitation. CSNSW advances this standard of training with consistent and appropriate ongoing supervision providing the therapeutic team with opportunities to explore alternative ideas and perspectives (Anderson 1987).

**Experience**

In order to establish a diverse team of specialist Program Facilitators, CSNSW created very specific selection criteria to ensure individuals who were successful in securing the specialist positions brought with them significant professional, clinical and life skills. The intention was to provide a minimum level of capacity through transferrable skills and experience within the team.
The diverse nature of these individuals and their respective backgrounds--such as psychology, teaching/education, mediation, drug and alcohol counsellors, and probation and parole officers--mean that the team represents a variety of disciplines across the humanities and corrective fields. To date this has served to enrich program delivery and effectiveness aiding the development of a meaningful framework necessary for a comprehensive and effective model of program delivery (Lakin 1970).

**Value of the role to create leverage for the process of change**

In order to create leverage for change there needed to be an understanding of the importance of the role that programs play in addressing offending behaviour. There have always been a number of very passionate, dedicated individuals who believed in and delivered programs for the Agency, however this was often done in isolation. The strategic action of CSNSW to place specialist Program Facilitators into the field has provided the ideal opportunity to add value. They have evolved into powerful agents for change. When a collective group of like-minded individuals come together, the driving force that leverages change requires experience, dedication and commitment.

It could be suggested that as a collective, specialist Program Facilitators have become the ‘pebbles’ that if strategically placed within the ‘pond’ of offender management can in turn create a series of ripples able to travel across all levels of the organisation. The positive energy created within this process is dispersed through the offender, staff and management population. With the “super vision” referred to by Kahn (1984) these professionals move between the role of being a student and mentor affecting multiple possibilities for change to generate a cycle where change informs change, whether negative or positive. The authors believe that if the focus is directed towards the positive, then the motivation of others in the team, their commitment to programs, and a priority towards resources can be leveraged towards the continual improvement of program development and delivery. This is in line with the expectations not only of CSNSW but of the general public who have tasked the organisation with the responsibility to reduce recidivism and thus create a safer community.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to highlight the additional value and leverage for change that is emerging as a result of the skills, attributes, experience and training of specialist Program Facilitators. These individuals have spurred another level of interactions, communications and advocacy throughout the CSNSW. Value is added when truly effective facilitators assume their responsibilities within the therapeutic group process and integrate all the essential ingredients for effective program delivery. This creates an environment where the focus is on ensuring the success of offence-related programs where both CSNSW and offenders benefits.

**Consideration should be given to the following:**

- Ongoing learning opportunities for professional development are maintained to allow the specialist Program Facilitator to build capacity through a continuation of appropriate learning and supervision.
- There needs to be an ongoing commitment to increase awareness of the credibility and value of the specialist Program Facilitator roles throughout the wider service.
- Greater cohesiveness is encouraged among the specialist Program Facilitators in order to support the level of commitment, motivation and sense of ownership of the role.


References


