Creating a Climate for Change
Critical Reflection and Organisations
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Abstract: An organization can be thought of as both an entity in itself with its own culture and as a collection of individual workers, teams and clients constantly creating the culture through their interactions. Cultural change can come from many directions: the environment or context, from individual workers, teams or clients. This paper/workshop explores the use of critical reflection in generating change in organizations. Critical reflection is a theoretical approach and a process for analysing and changing practice. Using critical incidents, workers can identify their own assumptions and values and those of their organization. The process can then enable workers to develop new ways of perceiving and acting in their practice and/or their organization. This can in turn lead to changes in organisational culture. I will demonstrate the process through asking participants to work through a critical incident of mine. I will also provide data about the kinds of changes resulting from workshops for participants and some case studies of how participants see themselves as generating change in organizational culture.

Keywords: Critical Reflection, Reflective Practice, Culture and Change

Introduction

This paper explores the use of critical reflection in generating change in organizations using the experience of twenty past participants in critical reflection workshops. An organization can be thought of as both an entity in itself with its own culture and as a collection of individual workers, teams and clients constantly creating the culture through their interactions (Gardner, 2006). Cultural change can come from many directions: the environment or context, from individual workers, teams or clients. Critical reflection is a theoretical approach and a process for analysing and changing practice. Using critical incidents, workers can identify their own assumptions and values and those of their organization (Fook, 2002). The process can then enable workers to develop new ways of perceiving and acting in their practice and/or their organization (Adams, 2002). This can in turn lead to changes in organisational culture. This process will be illustrated here with the results from twenty interviews with participants who had completed critical reflection workshops over twelve months previously.

Background

The issue of how change comes about in organizations is a critical one for practitioners and researchers. There is general agreement that organizations and the individuals within them must be able to adapt or their organization will not survive (Senge, 1990). Organizations do not operate in a vacuum and need the capacity to respond both to their environment as well as to internal shifts and development (Auer et al., 1993). Huffington et al (2004) suggest "the loosening of organizational boundaries, both external and internal, is leading us to new constructs of contemporary organizations and their leadership with the "need for a constant accommodation between the organization and its contextual embeddedness in order to keep its spirit and passion alive".

Some would see organizations as in a constant state of change particularly in response to the current increasingly complex context. Barnett (1999) suggests that “work is increasingly coming under the influence of forces external to itself” – through global markets, government intervention and the information technology revolution. The pressure to respond to these can create a sense of uncertainty and concern about risk (Beck, 1992). Giddens (1999) suggests that the concept of risk was initially a “mobilizing dynamic of a society bent on change” but has become embedded into how organizations work in a way that can be immobilizing: the focus can be so much on what might go wrong, the capacity for change is lessened.

The developing literature on organisational learning or the ‘learning organization’ is partly a response to thinking about how organizations manage change. Senge (1990:6), one of the early advocates of the ‘learning organization’, sees these as organizations that can “continually enhance their capacity to realize their highest aspirations”. Key aspects include systems thinking - seeing the influence between individuals and the organizational whole. The aim is that
individual patterns are clearer and can be changed effectively combined with building a shared vision of the future that fosters commitment. In order to do this Senge suggests staff need to question their assumptions about how they see and act in the world, so that they can focus their energies towards change, a form of critical reflection.

There is some debate in the organizational learning literature about the difference between the learning organization and organizational learning. Argyris and Schon (1996) talk about "the practice-oriented, prescriptive literature of "the learning organization," promulgated mainly by consultants and practitioners, and the predominantly skeptical scholarly literature of "organizational learning" produced by academics". Gould (2004) 2) suggests that it is more important to focus on two shared and fundamental premises "First, individual learning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for organizational learning ...Second, the learning experience is more pervasive and distributed than that delivered through a specific, designated training or education event; learning incorporates the broad dynamics of adaptation, change and environmental alignment of organizations, takes place across multiple levels within an organization and involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning and world views within the organization".

This affirms the complex dynamic between the individual and the organization in thinking about how change happens. Argyris and Schon (1996:190), for example, criticize writing about the learning organization that does not take into account the difficulties of implementing organizational learning. They “insist…that a theory of organizational learning must take account of the interplay between the actions and interactions of individuals and the actions and interactions of higher level organizational entities such as departments, divisions, or groups of managers".

The organization itself then needs to be committed to change as well as individuals and teams (Gould, 2004). Seeing a learning organization as one "that helps people to learn by constantly questioning itself" (Coulshed and Mullender, 2001) connects with the need for some form of reflective practice or critical reflection for organizations to remain dynamic.

Critical reflection is a process which can enable workers to engage with the questions and dilemmas of organizational life. The theory and processes of critical reflection are now frequently part of professional courses such as nursing, (Rolfe et al., 2001., Johns and Freshwater, 2005) social work (Fook, 2002, Taylor and White, 2000); and teaching and used in workplaces (Boud et al., 2001, Redmond, 2004). While there is considerable variation in how critical reflection is defined and the particular processes used, there is agreement that critical reflection essentially encourages rigorous exploration of professional practice experience, and can be used as both a learning and a research tool (Fook et al., 2006). The process involves enabling workers to articulate underlying and often implicit assumptions and values in a way that can lead to a deeper understanding of social and organizational contexts, as well as individual reactions and so to changes in practice (Kondrat, 1999).

This expectation of change is implicit in a critical reflection approach, but there are few empirical studies about its effectiveness (Gardner et al., 2006). There are also different views about where the focus of critical reflection should be in terms of seeking organizational change. Reynolds and Vince (2004) suggest that current writing has concentrated too much on the individual and “that less emphasis needs to be placed on reflection as the task of individuals, and more emphasis needs to be put on creating collective and organizationally focused processes for reflection". This is supported by Boud et al (2006) who advocate what they call “productive reflection” where the focus is on embedding productive learning through the “creation of contextualized workplace learning that allows and releases the capacity of the workforce, via de-centralized and flexible project groups, the use of multi-functional networks and multiple stakeholder perspectives”. This approach would require an organization to formally adopt productive reflection as a way of operating.

Woerkom et al (2000) on the other hand, suggest that individual rather than organizational characteristics are more significant in generating critically reflective working behaviour apart from participation in policy and decision making. Their study of workers in seven business organizations suggest that what is critical is individual self-efficacy: i.e. "the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations" (Woerkom et al, 2000:378). This is impacted on by critically reflective behaviour such as the ability to reflect on oneself in relation to the job, to challenge, experiment and share visions. Fook (2004) suggests the way forward here is to look at the interaction of the individual and the organization. She considers the impact of critical reflection training for peer review in a particular organization. While gauging the impact is complicated by a variety of factors from the degree of participation in training to the design of the evaluation tools, the results show that participants felt they had changed individually with an increased capacity to be reflective and self aware, more connections to colleagues, more practice strategies and insight into decision making and were able to be more explicit about organizational dilemmas, but not necessarily to see how to bring about change. She suggests that critical reflection training needs to make the link between individual change...
and change in the organization more explicit, concluding that “Critical reflection can become organizational learning by increasing awareness of the individual worker’s theory about their own place within the organization and therefore their ability to act with and within the organization”.

Research Process

In order to explore further the issue of how critical reflection can generate change in organizations, I want to consider here the experience of twenty participants in critical reflection groups. The critical reflection process considered here is the approach used at the Centre for Professional Development at Latrobe University in Australia. We see critical reflection as both a theory and a process for analyzing and changing practice through articulating hidden or implicit assumptions (Fook, 2002).

Participants in critical reflection workshops generally attend three sessions over two and a half days. The first half day session outlines the theories and processes of critical reflection with the facilitator presenting an incident from their own work experience for the group to process. In the second session, usually held a week later, each participant presents an incident from their work experience, with the emphasis being on analysis and exploration of the incident, identifying assumptions and values, emotions, relevant context, other perspectives, etc. A week later, in the third session, participants again consider their incident this time from the perspective of what they want to change in terms of attitudes and values as well as specific strategies.

One of the questions often asked about critical reflection is how effective is it in terms of change? Do individuals change their practice as a result of critical reflection workshops? Are there changes that impact on individuals and on their organization? And if so, what kind of changes is there? Does individual change connect with or lead to organizational change?

The following sections give two sets of beginning answers to these questions. The first section outlines results of follow up phone interviews with the twenty workshop participants. Participants mainly came from a large, bureaucratic human service organization and had given permission to be contacted for a follow up interview at the end of their workshop. Each interview took place at least a year after the participant had completed the workshop. The interviews took between 15 minutes and 50 minutes at an arranged time. Three other people declined to be interviewed: one was retiring at the end of the week and felt he didn’t have time; the second felt she didn’t have anything to say and the third thought that his comments wouldn’t be relevant because he came from an area where it was more difficult to use critical reflection.

Participants were asked:

- What did you find was useful about the critical reflection training?
- What have you been able to use in practice?
- What if anything has changed for you individually as a result of critical reflection training?
- What if anything has changed for your organization?

Results

The results particularly for the first three questions tended to overlap, so I have combined the results into the two sections following. The first considers whether individuals changed, and if so how and the second whether anything changed in the organization and if so what.

Individual Change (Summary Table One below)

Responses to this question divided into two: participants responded by talking about both how they had changed internally, generally in terms of a new orientation to how they worked and what this meant for external changes – in behaviour and relationships.

First internally, participants had shifted in terms of:

Understanding critical reflection processes: Sixteen of the participants talked about the value of learning and experiencing the critical reflection process. Some talked about it as a new framework or process for looking at work, others as a way of looking at a particular incident. Another said she was familiar with reflection, but the ideas of critical reflection were new.

Seeing the validity of using critical reflection processes: Many participants were conscious that their work tended to be very task focused and mentioned the lack of time to ‘stop and think’. For several participants the concept of seeing this as part of work practice was new. Most clearly, Suzanna said the “biggest thing is to know it’s part of good practice to reflect”. Ten participants talked about this as valuing taking time to think, seeing that this led to better choices and practice and could save time in the long run.

Awareness of multiple perspectives: Fourteen of the participants talked about being able to see a situation or incident from more points of view. This process of critically reflecting about their own and other participants’ incidents had demonstrated that there were always a variety of perspectives that could be considered. Many talked about being able now to ‘stand back’ and see that a reaction or comment could
mean different things for different people. This connected to:

**Having a greater awareness of underlying assumptions and values:** Thirteen of the participants identified this as a significant change. Typically, Heather said that what she learnt was “challenging assumptions, things you do without stopping to think, using critical reflection to look at my own reactions, learning to ask what is underneath”.

**Greater awareness of self and impact of self on practice:** Fourteen of the participants felt they were more aware of their own reactions either generally or how they were likely to react in certain situations. This meant that they could consciously stop and reflect on related feelings and thoughts before they acted or so that they decided not to act. Heather, for example, talked about being conscious of when she was feeling frustrated about another person not seeming to understand what she was saying. She had become more able to stop and ask herself why can’t I get my meaning across, why am I stuck? Sometimes she realized that what was actually happening was simply that the other person wasn’t agreeing, rather than that they didn’t understand and she needed to accept their different views.

**Connecting the personal and professional:** Eight participants felt they became clearer about the links between their personal and professional selves. This came up in two ways: first, eight participants talked about seeing common themes across their personal and professional lives, values common to both, for example. Second, five participants connected assumptions they had made from experiences in their personal lives with assumptions they made about how to operate as a professional. For Lisa, for example, this related to thinking in terms of binaries: people were either right or wrong, in agreement or in conflict. Realising how she had made this link enabled her to change her assumption. This also helped four of the participants take things less personally: to see when they were reacting from a personal perspective.

**Feeling empowered:** Nine of the participants talked about feeling more active, more assertive and/or being able to make their voice heard or using their voice more effectively. All gave examples about how this had translated into practice: such as being able to raise issues directly with a supervisor, asserting need to have their role recognized, influencing attitudes towards part time employees or making a change in work practice.

**Legitimising the place of emotion:** Eight participants raised the importance of noticing and exploring emotion, their own and other people’s. Noticing how they felt had been an important part of recognizing what was significant in their incident. There was a general view that this was not seen as acceptable in the workplace and needed to be: several of them said they now asked colleagues or people they supervised more about how they were feeling as part of exploring their reactions.

**Purposeful analysis:** Four of the participants talked about their previous experience of over-analyzing situations, getting stuck in thinking about a particular event or reaction. Part of the value of critical reflection for them, was a process for moving forward either to letting go of the incident or of actively doing something about it.

### Table One: Individual Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change Description</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of critical reflection process</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of multiple perspectives</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater sense of self and impact of self on practice</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater awareness of underlying assumptions and values</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeing the validity of using process: taking time to reflect</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling empowered</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognising the place of emotion</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting the personal and professional</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purposeful analysis</td>
<td>4</td>
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People also connected these internal changes to general changes in their practice. These included:

**transferability of critical reflection skills:** Thirteen of the participants mentioned that they could use the process in their ongoing work practice. Kate said the use of an incident “encapsulated a moment in time which gives a practice that can be used in other circumstances”. Several talked about using critical reflection on a daily basis; others about using critical reflection in their personal as well as work lives: for example, Susannah said “it’s not only in my work life, also in my personal life, it’s transferable across everything”. Some mentioned that the group process was helpful in providing enough experience of the process so that they were confident to use it outside the group.
More openness in relationships: Altogether fourteen of the participants raised this: five participants in a general sense; five specifically in relation to managers or supervisors and nine about relationships with colleagues and three supervisors about relationships with those they supervised. What participants meant by this was that they were more open to how other people perceived relationships or their perspectives generally. They were better able to stand back and consider the dynamic of a relationship rather than reacting negatively or critically; less likely to take as personal criticism a comment by a staff member. This meant that potential conflict could be explored more easily and before it became entrenched.

Changes in behaviour: Fourteen participants identified a specific change in how they acted as a result of the workshops. What this was varied considerably: Frank, for example, decided that this approach needed to be built into supervision in his team, his commitment to supervision increased so that he no longer changed supervision times unless there was an emergency and he ensured that a critical reflection approach was used as part of the team’s group supervision time. Two participants began to affirm their right to be part time workers in terms of the organization’s family friendly policy instead of being apologetic about not always being available. Others talked about changes to communication styles, ‘toning down’ behaviour that other people reacted negatively to, operating differently in meetings. Four talked about changes from the incident they had used in the workshop: changing how they related to a particular person or team.

Table Two: Changes in Practice

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<th>Change in Practice</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<td>More openness in relationships</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific changes in behaviour</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferability of critical reflection skills</td>
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Organizational Change (Table three)

Responses to this question were less consistent. Some participants pointed out that how you define change affects perceptions of what has happened. Does individual change over time have an impact on organizational culture that is more effective than starting with structural change, not necessarily owned by practitioners? There were mixed views about this. I have divided the results into what people saw as formal or structural change and informal or cultural change and then explore perceptions of the limits to change.

Formal/structural change: There was little formal change organizationally as a result of the workshops. Only two of the participants had implemented use of critical reflection in a formal sense – in regular and planned group supervision. Both felt this was a useful approach to embedding critical reflection in a team. These were the only two participants who had sought this level of change.

Informal /Cultural Change

Supervision: Nine participants talked about using critical reflection in supervision: six as managers, two as supervisees and one in working with students. Critical reflection was seen as a ‘great tool for supervision’, useful for teasing out reactions to very complex clients and providing “a way of questioning” helpful in supervision. A tenth participant said that you could ask for this approach in supervision and might now get it, depending on the particular supervisor.

Creating opportunities for critical reflection: Five participants had met with another participant for critical reflection as needed, usually outside the work place but during work hours: staff would suggest having lunch or coffee to use critical reflection about a particular incident. Two others had planned to meet to do this, but didn’t in practice.

One participant talked about people using critical reflection in general lunchtime discussions. Another talked about managers at her level meeting to talk about shared issues and seeking change in the organization.

Changing the culture: Eight participants talked about a change in the culture of the organization or at least of their team. Three said something like there was a ‘subtle change in the atmosphere of the team – a good teamwork feeling’. Freda talked about a big change in the negative culture of the team, which partly developed from her incident which was about the impact of another negative culture: staff related differently and “the atmosphere lifted”. Two noticed a difference in managers’ styles that had an impact on the teams they managed. Another participant felt that there was a different attitude to what was valued in the organization: people were seen in terms of skills and ability to relate rather than just their qualifications.

Impact of individual change: Six participants talked about the impact of their individual change as well as that of other participants. They felt that this would in itself make a change to the organization. Some were more optimistic about the scale of this than others: Kate said ‘must be a big impact for
the organization, having more people act in this way’; Yola “there may be a flow on effect from my change, new ways of looking at things”.

Table Three: Organizational Change

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<td>Using critical reflection in supervision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing the culture</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impact of individual change</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating opportunities for critical reflection</td>
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Limits to Organizational Change

While none of the participants I interviewed was negative about critical reflection as a process, there were certainly some who felt that its effectiveness was limited in terms of ongoing use in their organization.

Some also had doubts about being able to use the process as they thought it should be used because of how the organization operated. More specifically:

Issues with critical reflection process: Two participants had reservations. For Gary this came partly from negative past relationships in the organization. He was guarded about revealing what he thought in front of another participant so felt that he didn’t engage fully in the process, however, he also felt that this was typical of his approach and something he needed to explore. Val, a lone worker, felt that she was left to just ‘get on with it’ after the critical reflection process and that it was difficult to work with it on her own.

Need for follow up to embed critical reflection: Eight participants thought that there needed to be some kind of follow up to ensure that critical reflection became an ongoing part of practice. Five saw time as a major problem combined with significant workloads and a culture focused on tasks.

Organizational commitment: Six participants thought that there needed to be a formal system for using critical reflection, which would demonstrate organizational commitment to this. This would also ensure that time was allocated for the process; Martin said “would have been good to be forced to practice it, with demands of work things like that easily slip aside”. A related issue was ensuring that all staff had participated so that supervisors and supervisees were both familiar with the process and could use it together. However, two participants felt that critical reflection wouldn’t suit everyone: Pat said her supervisor wouldn’t be interested: “too much about feelings”.

One of the issues here was about whether the organization was genuinely interested in critical reflection. One participant pointed out the hierarchical and “punitive” nature of the organization which discouraged this kind of approach. Nora felt that critical reflection and follow up discussions with colleagues led to a greater understanding of systemic issues, but that when these were raised at more senior levels, the lack of response to led to greater frustration. Similarly, if critical reflection was to be used in supervision, staff would also have to trust their supervisors to use critical reflection well.

Systemic issues in the organization: Several participants suggested that systemic issues in the organization lessened the impact of critical reflection. High staff turnover meant that teams were faced with incorporating new workers who had not done the training. This also placed extra demands on staff already feeling stretched by workload demands. There was a sense for some that the organization had not thought through what it would mean to use a process like critical reflection: if staff were thinking more analytically about the organization, how were the inevitable suggestions about change to be dealt with?

Discussion

What does this mean then about the potential for critical reflection to generate change in organizations?

One of the most interesting aspects of the interview results is the different mindsets of those interviewed in terms of how critical reflection could influence change in their organization. Over half those interviewed felt the process had become part of how they approached their work and that this would have to have an impact on the culture of the organization over time. Some of these participants couldn’t imagine that others would not have incorporated critical reflection into their thinking. This often related to the theory embedded in critical reflection: acknowledging the place of emotion, for example, (McDrury and Alterio, 2002) or making the links between the personal and professional (Johns and Freshwater, 2005).

A significant minority, however, felt that for change to occur, the organization needed to more formally embrace critical reflection processes so that they were adopted and implemented more fully in the organization. This group felt that the culture discouraged the use of critical reflection: the lack of time, validation of outcomes rather than processes, high turnover and resistance at more senior levels in
the organization worked against what Boud et al (2006) would call the embedding of critical reflection. This certainly reflects the experience of other researchers: Binnie and Titchen (1999) document the importance of involving practitioners at all levels of the organization in seeking change in a hospital ward.

Overall then the results suggest the complexity of using critical reflection to generate change in organizations. On the one hand, a remarkable amount of change has been maintained over a relatively long period. At an individual level, most participants were able to articulate a change in their behaviour within the organization. For many of the participants the process itself was sufficiently powerful for them to integrate it into their thinking and use it actively as part of their work in the organization. A systems perspective would suggest that enough individual change will lead to organizational change (Senge, 1990) and certainly this was supported by at least some of the participants.

On the other hand if critical reflection is to be a more systematic means of increasing responsiveness to change, a significant number of participants suggest there needs to be formal commitment form the organization. This would mean establishing structures and processes that sustain the use of critical reflection as suggested by Boud et al (2006). Some participants wanted to be ‘forced’ to use critical reflection so that it became part of their practice and by implication part of the organization’s practice.

This raises questions then about why this way of doing critical reflection was so effective for some people and not as effective for others. Certainly some people in the sample were able to reinforce their learning by having occasional meetings with another person for critical reflection. In comparison, the participant who worked on her own had not felt able to use critical reflection after the workshop. Those who made a connection between using critical reflection in their personal as well as their professional lives may also have reinforced the value of their learning by using it in more than one sphere close to the time of the workshop. It may be that some people simply responded more to the workshop because of their receptiveness at the time or individual interest. It is also important to note, for example, Gary’s reaction of not being comfortable in the workshop because of his distrust of a colleague. Three people also declined to be interviewed – what would their story have been?

Gould suggests that individual learning is a “necessary but not sufficient condition for organizational learning” whereas Woerkom et al (2002) consider that if organizations want to develop critical reflection “this has to be achieved via stimulating employees self efficacy”. This research suggests that critical reflection certainly leads to change for most individuals with some implications for their organization. As Fook (2004) suggests, some individuals are able to initiate and sustain both individual and organizational change. However, it also seems that not all individuals are able to sustain and, for some incorporate critical reflection and related change without the more formal support of their organization. Working on both levels is likely to be more successful in seeking and sustaining long-term change.

This research leaves other questions to be explored. One is whether individuals need to ground their experience of critical reflection from their own experience first before they can apply it in the organization more generally. Would critical reflection that focuses on organizational issues provide sufficient learning about how to work with the feelings that arise in critical reflection? Are there some people who are less receptive to critical reflection and are there ways to engage them in the process?

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the value of critical reflection as a process which generates change at both an individual and an organizational level. The results support the value of seeking change at many levels at the same time, rather than expecting one approach to be effective.

References


About the Author

Ms Fiona Gardner

My background is in social work with over twenty years of experience in a variety of government and voluntary organizations. My roles included direct service, management, research and policy development all of which fostered a continuing interest in organizations and how they operate. From 1996 for eight years, I managed and taught in the Social Work Department at LaTrobe University in Bendigo which developed my interest in ongoing learning for students and practitioners. This was reinforced by my current role at the Centre for Professional Development running workshops for health and human service professionals using critical reflection an approach that enables workers and organizations to change. These interests are reflected in my current writing and research: Working with Human Service Organisations published recently by Oxford University Press and being one of the editors of “Critical Reflection and Professional Practice” was published in 2006.
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