

'It will be a life Jim, but not as we know it'
The power and place of innovation in services.

*Positive change is more likely when there are opportunities for innovation. In this article, **Ann Greer** explores key elements for true innovation. Ann draws on her experiences as a parent in North Queensland, and as a worker and advocate for people with significant disabilities.*

Innovation is a way of focussing on a problem or an issue and looking for the most up-to-date, potent and meaningful strategy to respond. The image generated by concepts of innovation are typified by words like 'excitement' and 'newness' - although it is also true that innovation may be the application of an old idea in a new and exciting way. Innovation in any field cannot exist in a vacuum and it needs other key elements to be 'in place' before it can flourish.

Creativity

Creativity in responding to the life needs of people has not been particularly evident in our culture for a long time. Creativity can only flourish when human beings have time to think, talk and devote significant amounts of energy to experimentation. It requires us to be excited about what we are doing and it requires a community of *other* creative thinkers to act as catalysts and sounding boards for new and interesting ideas. Creativity can only flourish when the community provides a supportive environment – one that is forgiving and prepared to go forward in partnership, offering and welcoming constructive criticism not negative comment.

Collaboration

The best schemes are often the ones where communities work together to come up with an idea or a strategy that is owned and developed by that community. Collaboration works in a world of trust and openness where the excitement of working together and the melting pot of ideas provides the spark required to move forward. Collaboration usually means that the key stakeholders are able to work together free of conflicts of interest and without competition for money, power or status. When there is strong collaboration on any project, the project is automatically elevated in status in the community – the fact that a number of people gave the idea their attention raises its interest value to others.

Focus

Innovation in any field usually infers that the field has been focussing on a particular idea or project, devoting a significant amount of time, energy and money to developing the concept. It is very hard to be innovative if there is no attention paid to the problem! Indeed it is even harder to remain focussed if the problem is not identified as a problem by the field.

Excitement

Innovation breeds excitement – or does excitement breed innovation? It really doesn't matter which comes first. Excitement generates energy and real change will not occur without large doses of both.

Money

Although we are all tempted to believe it, money is never the single answer to the needs of a community. We have all seen examples of people, service providers and governments who have ploughed thousands or millions of dollars into houses, services or projects which do not meet the initial identified need. Money is, nonetheless, an essential element in the package. All experimentation is exactly that, and in a climate of

experimentation when mistakes occur, it will be necessary to respond quickly and efficiently. In truly innovative environments, it is never seen as luxurious to budget sufficient funds in order to respond at these times.

It is doubtful that true innovation in our responses to people with disabilities is on the agenda in 2003. There are many reasons why this is so. All stakeholders – people with disabilities, their families, service providers and funders – are consumed with the competition for and lack of funds, to the detriment of innovative ideas. Forging new ways of doing requires new ways of thinking and it is clear that many services are ‘stuck’ in old ways. The economic and intellectual climate in the disability community appears to encourage services and families to maintain these old ways of doing. We have a long history of resistance to anything that hints of change. Some service providers and families (perhaps rightfully) believe that change brings loss and have fought to maintain the status quo.

Innovation has been squashed as governments and funding bodies have grown increasingly enamoured of ‘quick fix’ solutions to the needs of people with disabilities – particularly those who are labelled as challenging in their behaviour.

Within government and in funding bodies, there has been an appropriation of the word ‘innovation’ and it is now used to describe services in which people with challenging behaviour are congregated in housing units on one ‘campus’ or ‘placed’ in nursing homes during the day in order to receive support during daylight hours. These are not innovative responses but the acts of desperation that human beings perpetrate on each other in the absence of vision, creativity and funds.

Having said this, there have been individuals within bureaucracies, government ministers and members, services providers and families in Queensland who have responded to the challenge and struggled over many years to support and maintain quality services to people with disabilities. These services support the pursuit of an individually forged life for people with disabilities. Many families have made personal and economic sacrifices in their own lives because they have recognised the power inherent in providing a truly individualised and tailored support to their son or daughter. Our current climate does not support these people with disabilities, their families and services, many of which are run by small, active hands-on committees.

It is obvious that those who remember the ‘golden years’ of the mid 80s when the Federal Disability Services Act was first introduced, have a role in ensuring that stakeholders in the disability community understand that there has been a time in living memory when governments, funding bodies and the community believed and worked together to encourage innovative responses to the life needs of people with disabilities, regardless of the degree of disability experienced.

In order for this to occur again, we must plunge the depths to find the creativity, collaborative strength, focus, money and excitement that we know exists in our community in order to make innovation in services to people with disabilities a reality.

May the force be with us!