

YACCO – Youth Training Centre

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Here is another in the effective practice profile series from the Skills Enhancement Project. This one is from Langi Kal Kal, a youth training centre (YTC). It traces the challenges one trainee presented to the youth and child care officers (YACCOs) and examines some of the approaches they used. The following should be read in conjunction with the Langi Kal Kal effective practitioners' workshop and client interview materials. It is presented to stimulate discussion on the skills, knowledge and values required by a YACCO in a YTC.

The trainee

Theo was nineteen when he received a twelve-month YTC sentence. He had a long history of offences, including assaults. Theo came from a background of domestic violence, possible child abuse and significant disruption. He left school at an early age and went out to work.

The YACCOs

A number of YACCOs worked with Theo during his time at the Centre, as his case worker changed as he progressed through the sections. The following comments are drawn from staff involved with Theo over the period he spend in custody.

On arrival

When he first arrived at Langi Kal Kal, staff described Theo as an angry kid full of rebellion, who wouldn't follow rules and was utterly disinterested in support. He was placed in the assessment section, but did not settle. Staff recall that Theo verbally abused them at every opportunity. His favourite abusive phrase was 'you're a f.....dog'. As often happens in correctional institutions, trainees saw Theo as an easy stooge and frequently wound him up to abuse staff.

The first assessment of Theo was that he was naively unaware of how others used him. He was out of touch with his feelings and full of frustration and anger. Completing a detailed assessment was difficult because of his refusal to cooperate. Theo was regarded as a disruptive influence, capable of destabilising the section and probably of physical violence towards staff and other trainees.

The first challenge

Theo presented as a major challenge to staff; 'A kid like Theo can blow a section wide open'. The first priority for staff was to contain the influence Theo had on other trainees. He was virtually unapproachable, which meant staff could not connect and influence him positively.



The initial strategy

A team approach was adopted – to draw the line for Theo, which meant setting limits on unacceptable behaviour. The more experienced YACCOs realised that Theo was very good at sucking people into his power plays and gaining control. Concern was also raised about the influence of his verbal attacks on less experienced staff.

In essence, the team's approach was to present to Theo a totally consistent and unified group of staff who could not be played off against each other and who delivered the same message: 'This is unacceptable behaviour and these are the consequences'.

Holding the line was the main priority – whenever Theo acted out, whoever was there had to confront his behaviour. For some, this required a lot of nerve, as Theo was still largely unknown. The team approach included supporting each other, offering advice and feeding back information into the team to reinforce the strategy.

A system of consequences was put in place. This consisted of giving the message, fines and loss of privileges. Each interaction was recorded. Theo was soon in a position where every YACCO was dealing with him in exactly the same way. He had no privileges and his fines were mounting up. Staff watched for a change in Theo, but none came. He continued to stonewall and act out.

The team constantly reinforced the message that Theo could and should change his situation – 'Treat others like you want to be treated'; 'There is an easier way to do your time'; 'Other kids are using you – you will lose, not them'.

The ongoing assessment indicated that Theo was always trying to get in with heavies on section and that in part, he liked the status of being a bad guy.

Waiting for a breakthrough

Staff waited for a breakthrough. One YACCO observed that the patience of some colleagues was wearing very thin after a few weeks. Theo was testing the system to the limit.

The first sign of change occurred when Theo complained to a YACCO that he was the only one missing out on day outings. Seizing this opportunity, the YACCO advised Theo on an adult to adult level of the reality of

his situation – that he was doing his time the hard way, being used as a stooge, missing out on available benefits and would have to rethink his whole approach if he wanted privileges. Theo seemed to ignore the advice, but for the first time, he had listened.

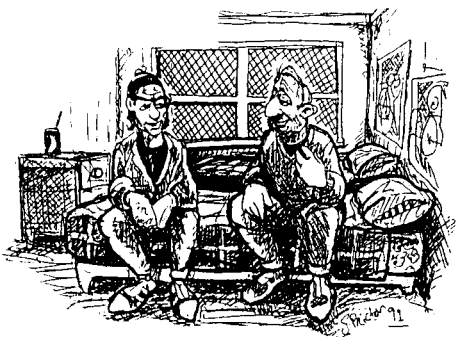
The second part of the strategy

This first sign of responsiveness prompted staff to change strategy. They continued to hold the line but began introducing other approaches, like trying hard to get dialogue going with him even if it meant copping his verbal abuse (e.g. 'f...off screw'), setting an example by not reacting, incorporating other trainees as role models and trying to find out what motivated him.

A responsible risk

About half way through his sentence, Theo began to open up to a YACCO who was connecting with him – getting dialogue going. Interestingly, this YACCO was also one of the most skilled confronters in the section. In retrospect, the YACCO described the process as 'getting through the barriers to the real Theo'.

The YACCO put up a proposal to grant Theo a weekend's leave. This was seen as risky, because his potential to abscond was high and he hadn't earned a leave pass. However, the YACCO dealing with Theo was certain they would achieve a breakthrough if he saw what privileges he was missing out on. It was agreed Theo would get the leave. The YACCO spoke to Theo and told him he had confidence in him and was relying on him to return and get on with things.



The leave went well and Theo returned. Several staff noticed a

lessening in Theo's intensity. Staff responded accordingly and seemingly for the first time Theo saw staff as people wanting to help. He began to get fewer sanctions and more privileges and responded to these with enthusiasm.

The hard work wasn't over

Although Theo was easing up, he still went out of control very easily. Two incidents occurred which resulted in heavy confrontation – a significant incident with a farm employee (not a YACCO) and an apparent attempt to smuggle drugs on section after a weekend's leave.



The two incidents occurred in quick succession and Theo was confronted with his behaviour and attitude, but in a different way. This time his immaturity, selfishness and thoughtlessness were highlighted. Theo was given no room to move. The YACCO doing the confrontation also worked hard on a theme of how adults do things and what fulfilling responsibility meant. Theo also lost all privileges.

Theo's response was favourable. He became more cooperative on section and stopped his constant verbal abuse of staff. Theo also began to seek assistance from a few staff and participate in the farm-work program. Staff soon noticed he had a very developed work ethic and was quick to learn. Theo began to set a positive example for other kids! This gave staff positive things to reward and build on. He soon earned back his privileges.



What motivated Theo

When dialogue commenced, staff began to get glimpses of what motivated Theo. He had powerful and confused emotions about his violent father and a strong aversion to authority. The YACCO who had been successful with Theo also observed he had difficulty trusting others.

Real progress began

Once staff were invited to help, things began to move forward quickly. A job on the outside was lined up for him, contact with his family was reopened and some issues worked through. Theo expressed an interest in cricket and joined one of the Centre's teams. He displayed a high degree of skill and won praise from other trainees and staff. A few YACCOs were now able to relate to Theo on a one-to-one level and discuss issues of concern to him.

Unresolved issues

Theo's temper remained a concern. Even when things were going well, he was unpredictable and could go off over apparently trivial things. Efforts to identify the triggers and work on his responses to situations were commenced, but were not successful.

Time to go

Theo's sentence ended and staff felt they had done well with him. For some, this appears to mean that they were happy to have drawn the line and maintained it in the face of his behaviour. For others, it meant getting through to a trainee with whom it was very difficult to connect.

Most staff still felt concern about Theo's temper and hoped he would follow up their suggestions when on the outside. By the time he left, he was well regarded by most staff and many other trainees. He went out to a job and a place to live and was in close contact with some family members.

A sense of humour

The YACCO who had worked closely with Theo recalled how on the day he was leaving, Theo walked up close to him, as he did when he first arrived, and yelled at him, 'You're a mad f..... dog aren't ya'. Theo then stuck out his hand and said 'only joking'.

Lessons learned from working with Theo

Staff made these comments in reflection:

'He was a perfect example of why you need to take a long-term view in this job. First off, I wouldn't have given him any chance of success, yet he did a complete turnaround'.



'Theo was proof of why you need patience and understanding to work with trainees. Some of them will test you to the limit. You have to understand what they are going through'.

'Not personalising how kids react to you is important - if you did you wouldn't last long. You need a clear sense of self'.

'It takes a lot of personal maturity to work with these young fellows - if you are not confident in yourself you can't do it. Also, after dealing with a trainee like Theo all day, you have to have ways of letting out the tension'.

Community Services Victoria - Skills Enhancement Project

YACCO - Youth Training Centre Workshop

In June 1991, an effective practitioner workshop took place at Langi Kal Kal Youth Training Centre. Experienced youth and child care officers (YACCOs) were asked about the skills, knowledge and values they need to do their jobs well. Their responses appear below.

Langi Kal Kal is a correctional facility for serious and persistent young offenders under the age of twenty-one. Set on a farm, it provides low-to-medium level security for up to seventy trainees. The following reflects only those areas covered in the workshop and is presented to stimulate discussion.

One participant at the Langi Kal Kal workshop was Max Alexander, a YACCO with thirty years' experience. When asked what he needed to be effective in his job, he replied 'a sense of humour, the ability to manage the stress associated with the job and working with a positive team'.

What is the major challenge of your job?

Getting the right balance between caring for the individual and managing a group of trainees. 'If the section is managed well, getting the balance isn't difficult, but because trainees are always coming and going, it isn't often we can settle a group down'.

What skills do you need to be effective on section?

'Observation - seeing what is going on and making an accurate assessment. You can't do that unless you are with the trainees, talking to them and helping them'.

Other key skills are:

- working as a team;
- reading group dynamics and being able to anticipate;
- consistency - staff as well as trainees need to know what is expected;
- being a positive influence;
- keeping trainees busy with meaningful activities;
- knowing individual trainees and understanding what is affecting them day to day;
- knowing when to intrude and how to defuse situations naturally;
- confronting difficult trainees and handling their anger and emotions;
- preventing drugs or alcohol from getting on section.

'What we try to achieve on section is an environment where the trainees feel safe, so they can settle down, learn from their activities and get on with others'.

What skills do you need to be effective with trainees?

The most important skill is being able to establish relationships with trainees. If the case worker can get through to a trainee and form a personal bond, it makes dealing with them so much easier, and gives the trainee a better chance of benefiting from his time here. Getting mutual respect and developing trust are crucial.

How do you gain respect?

'Treating them with respect means that we try and lead by example and provide positive role models. It can be difficult getting respect because of the power relationship. We emphasise that mutual respect is a good starting point'.

A number of personal qualities are important:

- Openness and approachability – 'Trainees need to feel comfortable about talking with us'.
- Not being judgmental – 'if they feel you are judging them, they will clam up'.
- Patience, tolerance and fairness – 'Trainees test you out, so not over-reacting is important'.
- Consistency – 'They want to know what to expect'.
- Resistance to manipulation – 'they won't respect you otherwise'.

How do you gain their trust?

First, you need their respect. These kids don't trust easily – often, their experiences have taught them to distrust adults. Learning to trust is a significant development for them. Usually trainees will trust if they feel safe, and get to know you as a person'. We find the following helpful in establishing relationships.

- Do activities together, so they see you in a different setting.
- Indicate your values – what you will and won't tolerate.
- Be honest – 'If you forgot to do something of importance for them, admit it. Set an example, even if at times this may mean copping their frustration'.
- Find areas of mutual interest.
- Be direct and straightforward with them at all times.

Other important skills?

Assessment is vital – staff need to know what is happening with a trainee at any time. The things we look for in assessing a trainee are:

- reaction to loss of freedom;
- things that motivate them;
- changes in mood or attitude;
- whether they have basic skills;
- evidence of drug and alcohol abuse.

Is there much risk of violence from trainees?

'No, violence is rare. Proper management of individuals and sections is the key. Verbal abuse is fairly common. You have to remember trainees don't

want to be locked up and for some it is very frustrating. Anticipation and the ability to defuse situations are vital skills in anger management.

What other skills are needed to deal with difficult trainees?

The key is how you set the parameters for acceptable behaviour. 'We call it drawing the line. Each trainee needs to know what is expected of them, what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour'.

'Obviously, trainees will cross this line – we expect that to happen, it's normal for young people to buck the rules. By making clear where the line is, we can show them what changes are needed'. The following are important in drawing the line.

- Consistency.
- Being patient and not expecting miracles.
- Not allowing them to bluff or scare you.
- Using rewards and penalties that reflect what happens in the real world.
- Never make them lose face – other trainees will give them a hard time and some may try to regain respect by acting out.

What knowledge do YACCOs need to be effective in a YTC?

YACCOs need a practical understanding of how young people function generally and how they will react to being in a YTC. The following are also important to know:

- What motivates the young people we deal with.
- The ways some young people learn to survive, like manipulation, bluff and 'conning'.
- How to get rapport going and motivate them.
- How to confront effectively.
- How to manage trainees who act out.
- How to teach practical skills, like personal hygiene.

What values are important in your work?

- Patience and a sense of humour.
- Accepting trainees as people.

- Enthusiasm and a desire to help.
- Leaving your own problems behind when at work.
- The ability not to take rejection and abusive behaviour personally.

Is there one personal challenge that stands out?

Ongoing learning is critical to the job. 'Every individual and group of trainees is different. Often they will present challenges that you haven't experienced before, so to be effective you have to learn new ways of working. It's a hard job if you're not prepared to learn new things and admit that you don't know something'.

Ideally, what do you want trainees to have learnt before leaving Langi Kal Kal?

'A determination not to come back! An improved ability to get on in the real world. We try and send them off with the best possible chance of success, with a place to live, a job, improved family relationships and a sense of self worth. The rest is up to them.'

How do you cope with work stress?

'You have to be serious about dealing with stress'.

- Don't take the pressure away with you – when you leave turn off.
- Acknowledge the tension and talk about it with others.
- Take time out, especially after a crisis.
- Be aware of your feelings.
- Accept that we all have failures.
- Develop a good team and ensure you have good management and support.

The Effective YACCO - Trainees' Viewpoint

To understand what skills, knowledge and values a youth and child care officer (YACCO) in a youth training centre (YTC) requires to be effective, the Skills Enhancement Project talked with five trainees from Langi Kal Kal (LKK). Standard questions provided a general structure and trainees were encouraged to talk about the things they saw as important. Direct quotes have been used.

What's good about your involvement with LKK?

Staff are willing to help

'I needed lots of help from them to get into a routine'.

'I need their help while I'm in here, to make it after I leave'.

'Help with activities and looking for jobs is important'.

Staff having a sense of humour

'This can be a really dreary place; humour helps'.

'Laughing eases the boredom'.

'The ones with a sense of humour are the easiest to get on with'.

'Not getting grumpy is important'.

Being treated fairly

'They are fair and treat you well, but you have to earn it'.

What would you like to change about LKK?

For staff to see when a standover is happening and doing something about it

'A lot of kids feel scared in here, because of stand-overs'.

'Staff protect us from the heavies'.

'They need to act quickly when a stand-over is happening'.

More consistency from staff

'Knowing what mood they will be in is really important in here'.

'The rules have to be applied to everyone the same'.

'Sometimes they don't do what they said they would'.

Staff being more relaxed

'We stir the uptight ones'.

'You can't talk to them if they are uptight'.

'If they are uptight, they won't see what is going on'.

Seeing what is actually going on in the section

'Not staying in the office, drinking coffee'.

'Moving around and observing'.

'Making the right interpretation of what is going on'.

Staff being more patient

'It is hard adjusting to being in here; they need to be patient'.

How would you change it?

Fewer 'power plays'

'We get pissed off if they use too much control. It's not necessary'.

'Power plays create a bad environment'.

More activities

'Boredom is a problem, especially on weekends'.

'Activities are a good way to get to know them'.

'I love getting out of here on activities'.

Being treated with more respect

'I'm nineteen and they call me a kid'.

'They'll treat you with respect like an adult, but you have to earn it'.

'We should be treated like men'.

Bend the rules a little

'It's normal to bend the rules a little on the outside'.

'We want to be treated like individuals and they have to be able to bend the rules'.

Can you talk easily with your worker?

They are straight talkers

'I can understand all of them'.

'It's good when staff are direct. That way you know where you stand'.

Other Comments - How trainees would change LKK

'There should be more women working in here. They are easier to talk to and don't need to use power plays to get things done'.

'The good ones always check on your progress'.

'They have to keep trying and understand what it's like for us'.

'It would be good to have someone we can talk to who isn't from here'.

Summary

What makes an effective YACCO from a trainee's point of view?

An effective YACCO is observant. They can understand what is actually going on and will do something about what they see, especially with stand-overs. They have to make it safe for all of us.

They also have to be consistent, because that is the only way we know what to expect and it's hard to relate to them if they chop and change. They are more effective if they are relaxed, because they set the mood in here. Someone with a sense of humour who doesn't take every little thing seriously is good, especially if you can talk to them.

We are treated fairly and earn respect by getting on with it in here, but it would be good if sometimes the rules could be bent a little. The staff need to understand what being in here is like for us. The really impressive ones talk naturally and check on our progress.