

Responding to Anti-Social Behaviour by Sector Partnering: Effective Partnerships across Organisational Difference

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Overview

The research project⁴ described in this chapter represents

... a practical trial of a collaborative interagency approach to the development of integrated interventions and strategies to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour in rail station environs in four locations in the metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia.

The focus of this research project was to develop and trial a model of interagency collaboration to support the formation of relationships between the Public Transport Authority (PTA), local government community services, community safety personnel and relevant non-governmental organisations.

*The intent of these collaborations was to develop holistic and constructive integrated responses to prevention of anti-social behaviour by young people in rail environs.*⁵

Project History and Goals

The idea for the project originated from a detached youth work team employed by a Local Government Authority. Initially, we intended the project would use action research principles to test the value of detached youth work teams in station environs. Detached youth work teams would be co-ordinated by local government youth services and work in the station environs. Teams would proactively find ways to address sources of conflict, respond to welfare issues, and

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⁴ funded by the Office of Crime Prevention, Western Australia

⁵ (Cooper, Love & Donovan, 2007: p 13)

work with both groups of young people and security personnel (Transit guards, rangers, and police) to find ways to avoid situations where young people are moved from one place to the next by different security personnel.

By the time the project commenced, there had been policy changes and key personnel had moved to other positions. Local Government policy had become less supportive of direct deployment of detached youth workers. We used the action-research framework to adapt the project to the changed political climate. We found local government youth services were interested now in looking for ways that youth workers, community safety workers, and the public transport transit guards could work together. Through negotiation, the purpose of the project was reshaped. The purpose of the revised project was: to 'develop methods for collaboration that enabled organisations with very different purposes and priorities to work together without compromising their own goals and values and without the goals of one group becoming dominant'. The project had three stages: initial interviews, collaboration and planning, and interventions and outcomes.

Initial interviews

In the initial stages of the project, we interviewed all key stakeholders. We interviewed the transit guard manager in a one-to-one interview. Role changes meant that a different manager was involved in the project subsequently. We held focus groups in each of four geographic areas to gather initial data from youth and community agencies who were interested in being part of the project. For practical purposes, this created four sub-projects, one in each location. Interviews and focus groups were used to help participants share information about their agency's roles, goals and priorities; and to gather preliminary information about participants' perceptions of problems, the causes of problems, and their relative priority in terms of each organisation's goals.

When we analysed the initial interviews, we found different groups had quite different agendas. In the past, there had been quite a lot of mistrust between transit guards and youth workers. A key task for the project emerged: to trial a method or process whereby Transit Guards and youth and community agencies could work together, without sacrifice on either part. We found partner organisations wanted to both further their own organisational goals and achieve beneficial results for young people.

As the project progressed, all the partners were able to identify common concerns between youth workers and transit guards, despite their very different organisational priorities.

From the initial interviews with the transit guard manager, we found that Transit Guards saw their primary role as provision of security on trains. Their position was complicated however by the fact that they also had several other roles and responsibilities including checking for fare evasion, and duty of care for vulnerable people. These roles sometimes conflicted. The manager was sympathetic to young people and said that transit guards viewed arrest as a 'last resort' when they perceived they had no other options. In the interview he explained that conflict occurred between their duty of care responsibilities and their security responsibilities. Transit guards could spend several hours trying to find care for a vulnerable person. This occurred most frequently late at night. For example, a young people, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, would get off a train and have no way to get home. When parents could not be contacted or were unwilling to collect the young person, two transit guards had to remain with the young person until some other arrangements could be made for the young person's safety. Crisis agencies were often not able to respond in a timely way. From a security perspective, welfare duties like this prevented Transit Guards from performing security function on trains, and this meant that other vulnerable people on trains had no protection. The transit guard manager also reported that other people fleeing

from violence sometimes came to stations for refuge, because they knew they would get assistance.

Interview data also revealed that Transit guard managers wanted to know about any incidents when transit officers behaved inappropriately, because, from a management perspective, inappropriate responses by transit guards put their colleagues at risk and risked alienating public support.

From interviews with youth workers we found that some had received complaints, mostly about fines and ticketing issues and security on trains. None of the youth workers, however, had access to any avenue by which to resolve complaints they received, and none had acted on complaints from young people. As a result, youth workers listened empathetically but didn't take complaints any further. None of the youth workers had followed up allegations, nor had they supported young people to pursue their complaints. Youth workers had not been able to influence policy or practices in any way that would avoid future problems.

Initial interviews confirmed that both sides were keen to examine whether collaboration could achieve mutually beneficial results.

Social action and action learning

The project used a 'social action' theoretical framework within an 'action learning' methodological approach. A social action framework encourages participants to identify actions that they, themselves, can take that will contribute to positive change⁶ rather than to wait for other to act. Social action uses social group processes to help participants gain a more complex understanding of other participants' perceptions of issues and share responsibility for planning and implementing action to alleviate problems identified. This approach requires a, there is a strong commitment to seek ways to minimise the adverse effects of power relationships. The 'action learning' methodology⁷ meant the project used cycles whereby action would be planned, then implemented and then reviewed. The learning from the review was then used to plan the next cycle of action or adjust on-going action.

The social action literature⁸ emphasises the importance of developing strategies to overcome apathy and the need to promote optimism that change is possible. This observation is especially pertinent to social action projects like this one that are intended to address longstanding problems that seem intractable. A major obstacle to successful social action can occur if facilitation processes allow people to use meetings as a forum to allocate blame to other people, organisations, or bodies.

In this project, therefore, it was seen as important to recognise that the process would need:

- To help participating agencies overcome feelings of apathy and hopelessness;
- To overcome the social and political difficulties of interagency collaboration;

⁶ See for example, Hope & Timmel (1996)

⁷ Reg Revens. Many sources. The James Thornton Institute for Leadership and Development offer a useful definition of Action Learning drawn from Revans work.
http://www.itilttd.com/al_definitions.htm

The free library offers open access to his work
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Reg+Revans:+action+learning-a099932544>

⁸ Op cit

- To help groups keep a 'solution focus', and maintain impetus over a period of time; and
- To avoid the degeneration of groups into inactive 'talking shops'.

Strategies were developed to ensure equality of participation, prevent the process from being co-opted by a single stakeholder or group of stakeholders, and ensure regular 'review' of actions that had been agreed. The two main strategies used for meetings were 'structure' and a 'focus on finding solutions to problems'. When groups had planned actions, regular meetings were scheduled to review outcomes, to share learning, and to replan.

'Structure' in Meetings

During the initial interviews, described above, we met with Transit Guard manager and Youth and community agencies separately. In the second phase, joint meetings were held between local youth and community organisations and transit guards. These meetings were potentially very difficult. Both sides were nervous about the intentions of the other group. Collaboration fails when one party successfully co-opts the whole agenda and expects other participants to work around their priorities. There were also the usual risks that individuals would dominate discussions, and that different stakeholders would attempt to impose their personal priorities and perspectives on the meetings. At each of the first 'joint meetings' in each of the four sub-projects there was a very high risk that things would go badly wrong and collaboration would fail before it began.

The first few joint meetings in each location were initially very highly structured, especially the first joint meeting between local organisations and the transit guard manager. The purpose of tight structure was to limit the ability of any particular group or individual to dominate proceedings. The results were positive in each location and ensured that everyone participated and was heard.

The initial joint meeting used a simple process. Each person who attended was invited to outline the goals, purposes and priorities of their organisation. This was timed and very short. Each person had only one or two minutes. Time was shared equally and people had to be succinct.

In the evaluation, participants identified that this sharing had been one of the most useful parts of the process. Participants discussed how this process challenged their assumptions and stereotypes about other organisations. At all locations these initial stereotypes of participants were challenged. Many youth workers reported they had previously thought that transit guards were keen to 'throw kids off trains', lock them up, and give them infringements. The transit guard manager reported that previously he had thought youth workers were gullible 'bleeding hearts' who spent their whole time looking for problems, believing anything that young people told them, and then verbally abusing ordinary hard-working people without enquiring about the veracity or circumstances surrounding allegations. By the end of the meetings youth workers realised that the transit guards would rather **not** lock up young people if they had options. The transit guards realised that youth workers had independent critical faculties and didn't unquestioningly believe everything that young people told them.

In the second joint meeting at each location, project participants were invited to share their perceptions of problems. To begin this process, the researchers presented back to participants a rich picture of all the perceptions of issues that had been raised in their location in the preliminary interviews. Each individual was asked to share their interpretation of why the problems identified in their location had emerged. We asked individuals to 'make sense' of the perceptions presented to them. Again, the meeting process was highly structured. We allocated a fixed amount of time to each participant, so they could share their interpretation without interruption. Through this process, participants identified that many of the issues raised were multifaceted and that

successful intervention could not be achieved by any single agency working alone. This led the group to seek collaborative solutions they could implement together within the policy and financial constraints of their own circumstances. Each group planned their actions and collaboration according to local concerns, priorities and resources.

A Focus on Solutions

Inevitably, interagency collaboration involves complex social interactions between participants. Power and control issues create tensions between participants in meetings, and other forms of group collaboration. These tensions reduce the potential for solutions to emerge or be implemented. A large part of the difficulty of this project was management of group processes in ways that minimised unhelpful interpersonal conflict, whilst promoting a climate where difference can be shared and explored constructively.

We used a social action framework because this promoted a forward-looking, pro-active approach. The framework used was based upon Freirian principles of community work and adapted from the six-step process outlined by Hope and Timmel.⁹ This social action process encourages all participants to deepen their own understanding of the issues faced by the different communities. The underlying reasoning was that it when they have done this, they can develop solutions they can implement themselves.

Decisions about who to invite to participate at each of the four locations were determined primarily by recommendations from initial partners to the project in each location (usually the local government youth officer). We wanted to include at least some people who had a commitment to a 'solution-focus'. In theory and from our experience, the most successful groups included people:

- who had an activist orientation and wanted to develop constructive practical responses to problems identified and not just discuss issues;
- who believed that even small- scale changes that bring benefit are worth making, even if they do not provide a complete solution;
- who were creative in solving problems and willing to try out new approaches, even when there is a risk of failure; and
- who had sufficient seniority to authorise initiatives or can gain authorisation speedily, this occurred when individuals worked in organisations that had sufficient organisation flexibility, but is impeded when organisations are overly bureaucratic.

To some degree, the process at the first joint meeting enabled self-selection of people with these attributes. For example, the first joint meeting in one location was attended by a youth worker who wanted to use the meeting as a complaints forum and an opportunity to blame other organisations for local problems. The meeting process allowed her to express her view but did not permit her to make this the primary focus of the discussions. She decided not to attend later project meetings.

The Outcome for Young People

One of the outcomes of the project is that youth workers are now able to advocate more effectively for young people who are in conflict with transit guards.

⁹ See Hope and Timmel (1996).

The youth workers gained a forum where they could air issues with transit guard management and actively resolve both individual and systemic practical problems. Through this process, the transit guards became aware of additional resources available to help young people and more able to help young people access welfare services.

The transit guard manager who participated in the project was sufficiently senior to negotiate systemic change and to quickly respond to individual complaints. In one instance, for example, he was invited to a barbeque at an alternative education program and a young person present told him about an incident that had occurred that morning. The transit guard manager was able to investigate immediately, substantiate the complaint, and take action. In this instance, the person involved was a private security contractor rather than a direct employee who had behaved inappropriately, and, as the manager had no training responsibility for the employee, he instructed the security firm not to send that member of staff again. This immediate and open response gave the young people a lot of confidence and helped the youth workers realise that the transit guard manager would not support staff doing the wrong thing. There followed a useful discussion where the manager explained that not only did such incidents put the public 'off-side', but that other transit guards would rather work with colleagues who had good interpersonal skills because this reduces their own risk. From this perspective, transit guards who behave inappropriately aggravate aggression and this puts everyone at risk.

A very beneficial outcome of the project was that all participants achieved a better appreciation of the roles and constraints in each other's work. An additional important outcome of the project was educational. Youth workers had a better understanding of the difficulties of transit guards' work, and were also able to provide more accurate information to young people about legal and other issues. Transit guards learned more about what youth workers are trying to do.

What Worked in this Partnership?

In the project report¹⁰, we identified the following factors as significant in supporting or inhibiting successful interagency collaboration-building activities.

Factors that **supported** successful inter-agency collaboration:

- Processes to build understanding and avoid tensions in the early stages
- Solution-focused problem solving
- Respect by agency participants for the different goals and roles of other agencies
- The inclusion of as many relevant local organisations as possible
- Appropriate frequency of meeting and meeting length, locally determined by participants
- Maintenance of an action focus to create realistic short-term achievements
- Achievement of small successes early to build confidence and enthusiasm

Factors found to **inhibit** interagency collaboration processes:

- Participants over-constrained by bureaucratic procedures or bureaucratic mindsets
- Participants without sufficient authority to implement changes or interventions
- A lack of continuity of involvement of participants
- Participants with too many or more important competing priorities

¹⁰ Cooper, Love, & Donovan (2007, p. 71)

- Conflicts, if allowed to become personal
- Key organisations missing from the initial workshops

In the final part of this chapter, we will discuss three of these factors in detail:

- managing group dynamically
- having a clear understanding of agencies' differences in priorities
- finding a broker

Managing group dynamics effectively

We learnt that effective facilitation strategies must be used throughout the process to maintain positive interpersonal group dynamics. This was necessary to avoid conflict and inequality of contribution. Group dynamics had to be managed continually and carefully. From experience, poor group dynamics have capacity to impede gains made by interagency collaboration. For example, we found that people can be easily offended or feel slighted at things that others might not even have noticed. This happened on two occasions during this project and required time and effort to rebuild trust and confidence. Secondly, we found we had to actively maintain the 'solution focus' in discussions. This focus can be lost easily when groups lose confidence, when members have insufficient power to make agreed change in their own organisations, or if power struggles emerge during discussion. We consider these issues should be anticipated as normal and acknowledged as an expected part of these types of project.

Clear understandings of each agency's priorities

We found it is helpful to inter-agency collaboration to begin from an acknowledgement that agencies have different roles, and to discuss difference and similarity openly in the early stages of collaboration. In this case, discussions enabled the groups to clarify at the beginning that the youth workers were not going to be doing the transit guards' jobs for them and vice versa. The groups were then able to clarify how they might be able to collaborate without compromising their own work. The process allowed each agency to clarify its own purposes and priorities and to collaborate based upon open acknowledgement of differences in priorities and purpose. We found that this made everyone less defensive about their own work and more open to listening to what others had to say.

We also found that lack of clarity about agencies' priorities had been a major source of misunderstanding and failure in past collaborative projects. Some collaboration partnerships ran into difficulties because partners did not have a clear enough appreciation of their partner agencies' priorities and constraints on action. In some cases, however, problems arose because partner agencies have not been clear enough about their **own** priorities. Youth workers are particularly susceptible to this when they are not able to articulate the purpose of their work clearly, or when it is based upon tacit understanding. When this occurs youth workers may be too easily swayed to adopt the priorities of other agencies or may lead youth workers oppose the partner agencies' priorities for fear of 'contamination' of their own work. Either response negates what they might have achieved through collaboration. For example, when youth workers work with police or with shopping centre security, it is problematic if youth workers assume responsibility for a policing role. However, when youth workers work antagonistically and in isolation, they lose the capacity to influence policy and practice in other organisations. Both options are limiting.

Find a Broker

We learnt that for cross-sectoral partnerships, it is important for youth workers to have connections with people in other organisations who are able to address systemic problems. This means that youth workers sometimes need access to networks of senior staff within partnering organisations. If youth workers want to influence how other organisations respond to young people, it is important to have networks at the right level in the partner organisation. The partner needs to be in a position where they can bring about organisational change.

Consider, for example, the situation when a young person approaches a youth worker because they are having problems at school and it emerges that the cause of the problem is within the school system. If the youth worker does not have a relationship with someone influential in the school, they are unlikely to be able to respond proactively. The youth worker has a greater capacity to contribute to systemic change if they are able to develop relationships with influential staff in the school.

Sometimes youth workers need another organisation to broker that relationship. Youth peak bodies can sometimes act as brokers. Opportunities arise when organisations have enough status to knock on doors, Brokerage may be possible through government departments with responsibility for youth. Brokerage can be used to raise issues and concerns and make connections with people who can change things.

In small communities, it's often possible to do this informally. One strategy is for individual youth workers to find a local broker-connector-advocate-mentor. This can be someone influential from a TAFE, university, Rotary club, or a big school. Their role is to be someone who can help youth workers form partnerships with the agencies or institutions at the appropriate level.

Avoiding 'Tokenistic' Youth Participation

One of the biggest concerns with participation and collaboration projects is how to overcome tokenism. In many research projects that involve young people's participation, individual young people represent themselves or their immediate group of mates. For some types of research, this form of participation is entirely appropriate, and can offer essential insight. For other types of research, it can have a negative effect through being tokenistic and partial. The outcomes may also be misleading. Ill-considered methods of recruiting young people to research project often lead to tokenistic participation.

This particular project made a conscious and contentious decision to avoid tokenistic participation by young people. The issue of whether and how to involve young people raised several questions. When we examined these questions, it forced us to think carefully about the **purposes** of the project and the **practicalities** of how many people could be involved in it and still maintain the ability to use group processes effectively. After careful consideration of these questions, we decided not to involve young people directly in project meetings. Our reasons are as follows.

The primary **purpose** of the project was to develop effective means for **organisations** to work together to respond to issues that were already well known. The primary purpose was not to gather new information about the nature and extent of problems, but to examine how organisations could collaborate across difference. For this we needed collaboration by people who work in organisations and have sufficient power to influence organisational policy and practice. From the perspective of the purposes of our project, we needed a conduit that could channel perspectives important to a diverse population of young people. This raised the question of how this should be done.

We considered the **practicalities** of how we could involve young people in this research in a non-tokenistic way. There were two possible means to represent the diversity of young people's experience, through direct participation by young people or through indirect representation of young people.

Direct representation raised selection problems, retention problems and questions about numbers. Direct representation of young people by themselves would require continued participation by a sufficiently diverse group of young people, over a period of eighteen months. Young people would need to be recruited to represent a range of perspectives, including different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds and gender. **How many young people would you need in each location to have a representative sample of young people?** When we thought about this, we did not believe that we could recruit, retain, and support sufficient young people from each important group to represent the diversity of young people's opinions, especially as research by Joanna Wynn¹¹ indicated that for many young people participation in research projects is not high amongst their personal priorities.

Further consideration of this issue raised others concerns. At one of the preliminary meetings, one of the youth workers indicated she was working with young men who had had conflict with the transit guards. She wanted to bring them along to the meetings with transit guards. She stated that the purpose was to confront the transit guard manager. This drew attention to an additional problem. **If the meeting had been attended by both a group of women who were feeling intimidated on the trains and wanted increased transit guard presence, and a group of young men who had had conflict with transit guards, whose voice would have been heard?** Our guess is that the young women would have felt intimidated and not voiced their opinions nor come back to another meeting.

Finally, as described earlier in this chapter, it was very difficult to effectively facilitate interagency group dynamics. Inclusion of young people directly representing the diverse views of all young people would have increased the size of groups beyond that which would be manageable within the social action framework. It would also have raised a problem of how to ensure that young people were not used in a tokenistic way to further the agendas of different parties.

Indirect representation of young people raised questions about who could best represent the diversity of perspectives. The youth workers in our study had contact with young people of different ages and from different groups, or had networks with these contacts. The nature of the relationship between youth workers and young people also meant that young people are able to discuss issues with youth workers without fear of retribution.

We considered both options and the purposes of our project and chose the second option because we believed that direct representation would be unrepresentative, tokenistic and would make the project methodology unworkable. We made the decision to ask youth workers represent the diverse opinions of young people they knew. If youth workers did not feel they could do this, we asked them to find out from young people the diversity of young people's opinions and report their findings to the meetings. We found that in most instances, the youth workers were very aware of the opinions of young people.

In one instance, the youth workers decide to survey young people. The results were surprising to some people. The survey found some young people surveyed stated they wanted more transit

¹¹ Oral presentation of her research on young people and participation YACVIC conference 2007

guards because their presence made them safe. We analysed the profile of young people who most strongly expressed this opinion and found that it was most strongly expressed by working class young women whose parents couldn't drive them around and who relied on public transport to travel, especially at night. Their main concern was predatory men on the trains at night who they feared would harass them or pay them unwanted attention.

In Summary

This project was a practical trial of interagency collaboration in four areas of Perth between the Youth Sector and the WA Public Transport Authority Transit Guards. Its aim was to improve outcomes for young people and other stakeholders by improving relationships and understanding between youth workers and transit guards indirectly; through interagency collaboration and direct problem solving; and through systemic and cultural changes. It achieved numerous improved outcomes for young people, ranging from the resolution of fines issues, to the provision of cultural awareness training for pre-service Transit Guards. It provided valuable learning about how a well-structured, well-managed collaboration can address significant misunderstandings and shortcomings between sectors, in this instance the Youth Services and Public Transport sectors.

The project highlighted the difficulties of interagency collaboration in general and the special difficulties when collaboration is with partners who have very different purposes. Collaboration between youth workers and the Public Transport Authority brought benefits to youth workers and indirectly to young people. It enabled youth workers to have influence over policy issues beyond their own organisation, elevated the status of youth workers and allowed youth workers to create links that enabled them to be more effective at advocating for change and in supporting young people to take effective action if they had complaints. It also enabled youth workers to gain an understanding of the difficulty of the transit guard role. Any collaboration with disparate organisations brings risks that youth workers lose sight of their own goals and purposes. Clarity about roles and purposes offers youth workers some protection against this risk, and enabled youth workers can affect change beyond their own organisation, without compromising their primary purposes and values. This project ended more than a year ago. Some relationships have remained strong despite personnel changes. We believe the basic process is useful and transferable to other settings.

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