

Milparinka and Self Directed Approaches: An Overview

Several years ago Milparinka commenced a process of transforming itself from an agency based on conventional and fixed day program practices into one that supports individuals with disabilities and their families, "one person at a time", to achieve richer and more satisfying personal lifestyles.

While there are many elements to this process of change there are two key tenets which are embedded at all levels of the agency, from the committee of Management to families and individuals, that demonstrate our overall commitment. First, that the strategic direction for the organisation should be developed on the basis of what individuals and their supports tell us is important to them. Second, from what we have learnt over the past years, that we work with individuals and families in redeveloping the concept of service provision, not simply to an alternative model of service, but as a fluid process existing and evolving within the context of each individual's life and life ambitions.

Regardless of the words we use to describe what we are doing we remain constantly vigilant of the reality that good intentions should not be confused with good results. Assisting people to have a good and personalised lifestyle is a daunting task which is easier said than done (and in many cases is often said and not done). Liking the idea of supporting personalised lifestyles doesn't mean it is happening and our measure of success is not about how we describe things, or how committed we say we are but rather the actual positive differences that are occurring in people's lives. People living lives that make sense to them and telling us that their life is good is more evidence to us that what we are doing is right than a cleverly written policy that sounds great but makes little difference in someone's life.

Milparinka has developed service principles based on our commitment to individuals having authority, self direction, connection to their local communities and having good lives. These principles are reflected in the strategic commitments and direct all organisational and service development.

Each person is unique and our assistance is provided to support each individual to achieve a lifestyle that reflects their individual interests, ambitions and visions.

Planning and knowing about someone is not about a point in time or a specific document. It is about ongoing discussions with people, in a way that they prefer, understand and can positively engage in.

People do better in having autonomy and self direction when they are able to communicate their needs and wants more effectively. We support people to identify and develop the most effective forms of communication for themselves to be able to communicate more effectively and have greater influence in their lives.

People do better in different parts of their lives when they are assisted to manage and safeguard their vulnerabilities so that these do not have negative consequences in their lives.

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People have the authority and autonomy to self direct their services and to change their mind and find something that is better to do. This takes priority over organisational need for structure.

Quality measures of processes and outcomes are essential to providing a framework for services. The measures of quality that apply reflect the premise that each person is unique and that within the quality framework, measures are developed in relation to the part of each individual's life that we are involved with.

We support the use of generic services over segregated services with emphasis on natural supports and social inclusion.

We support people in an intentional way to participate in lifestyles that make sense to them and assist them to have a presence in the right places, with valued roles and connections and right relationships to others who are important to them.

The embedded commitment of these principles at the most senior levels of the agency can be seen in the development of our current Strategic Plan. To ensure that individualised ambitions formed the greater part of our future development we engaged an International Consultant, specialising in the personalisation of services, Michael Kendrick. Kendrick interviewed, individually, over 25 percent of our service users and families with the intention of identifying what each person wanted from the service in the future. It was these responses that had the greatest influence on establishing our future goals. The key commitment in the current plan is: to achieve a definable and gradual changeover from past models of group support to individualised supports for people that increases our capacity to generate and sustain desirable personalised outcomes and lifestyles with people.

In encouraging people to think more deeply with us or others we believe that safeguarding the authority of service users and their families is essential. What we mean by authority is being sure that people are in a position to negotiate with us and others – this includes first, an ability to refuse and counter propose:- in part this means our agency needs to be open to examination, flexible, fluid, responsive and not fixed and menu driven. Second it is about ensuring that people with disabilities and key people in their lives can govern and oversee what is happening, that is, guiding and steering their services:- having authority in what happens to them.

There are different ways of reviewing our agency's capacity to ensure individuals have authority. Primarily this is through discussions with each person and their family/advocates/friends. There are also questions that we can ask ourselves as we move through this process and review what we are doing. Is the person who is using the supports actually able to make a significant difference, through his or her own actions, in regard to their own life and the character of the services/supports he or she is receiving? How many key decisions about the design and operation of their service are made by the person who is using the service, and how many are made by others on behalf of the service user?

While we support many people individually outside of group activities there are many people for a variety of reasons who still remain, many by their own choice in group activities. While it is not our preferred model of support we will not neglect our commitment to provide the best possible support. People presently using groups supports are encouraged to be involved at different levels in personalised and self directed approaches. There are many elements both direct and indirect that we incorporate to increase self directed approaches into our group programs, these include aspects such as staff training, benchmarks around groups sizes and community access, socio-grams to identify the types of communication that is occurring so that it can be redirected to more empowering relationships. We have adopted, with the support of Michael Kendrick, a conceptual framework, model coherency, which provides a common point of reference, which all staff are aware of and trained in. This framework creates with all staff a common point of reference to think about their work which is not about supporting disabled people in groups but is about finding ways to support people to have individualised lifestyles and supports that make sense in the context of their lives and communities they live in. Our model of developing support plans with individuals in groups is deliberately focused on supporting people wherever possible to achieve personal ambitions.

We believe without reservation that central to the process of self direction is ensuring people have the communication tools to be able to tell us what they want and to be able to influence the world around them, to support this we have a full time communication manager, sessional speech pathology and staff communication training every fortnight. We believe that if we are not spending significant time, energy and funds on supporting people to communicate so they can tell people what they want then we are not serious about people influencing their own lives.

Regardless of what descriptions we might use clever words or worthwhile descriptions do not determine that what we are doing is relevant or important. The issue of user satisfaction is such a fundamental premise to our individualised support that extensive thought and consultation with service users and families, the primary owners of the satisfaction, has been undertaken to inform our concepts and measures.

Satisfaction is people feeling positive about themselves; making connections with others; having things work for them; feeling their life has been enhanced. Such satisfactions can only be measured by the perceptions of the participants. In accepting the reality of individualised models, Milparinka accepts the consequent reality that measures of satisfaction will also be individualised.

Key differences between traditional models of support and a self-directed individualised model involve a paradigmatic shift because clients/families experience services no longer designed for them, but with them or by them. Satisfaction under traditional support models was a largely ignored concept hidden behind usually quantitative evaluations which simply compared outcomes against rigid program goals. In its self-directed model, Milparinka

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measures satisfaction qualitatively and directly with service users across different variables and time frames.

We have strategically adopted this postmodern perspective of client satisfaction which rejects a linear cause-and-effect equation. Under our perspective, satisfaction is perceived as constructed through a myriad of social, cultural, physical, and economic concepts unique to each person. Individual client/family narratives ("local narratives" rather than the "grand organisational narratives") are the real source of determining stakeholder satisfaction. To illustrate how the approach works in practice we provide two real life examples. I will then outline our internal processes deliberately designed to achieve the essential communication channels and right relationships which underpin this focus on client satisfaction.

Vanessa and her mother want to control and enact the direction of her supports and expected outcomes. They share a vision of what her future life will look like but do not want a management role in achieving this. They have authority in the relationship with Milparinka but want us to manage the process for them.

Ben and his family want to identify outcomes, control the direction of the supports helping him to achieve a better life. Under a financial hosting agreement with Milparinka, Ben has achieved independence in his community and his family reports high levels of satisfaction with our service

At Milparinka self determination and the personalisation of lifestyles and supports is not seen as a formula. It is achieved through a process of thinking and talking with individuals and their families to find a lifestyle that makes sense to them. A lifestyle that they can look at and describe as being good for themselves.