

Proposed “Markers” of Serious Agency Work in Achieving Person-Centred Outcomes

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Introduction

In recent years, there appears — at least superficially — to be a virtual tidal wave of agencies and systems claiming to be in one manner or another something they call “person-centred”. Given that the term is so vaguely defined, it is no wonder that it is hard to know whether such claims are merely posturing or whether there is any real substance behind them. Though it is doubtful that all of those who make these claims are simply patently insincere, there is reason to be cautious and a little skeptical. This is unavoidable given that, in the end, we would be trusting the most essential ingredients of possibly very vulnerable people’s lives to these agencies and systems. If they are unable to deliver on their rhetoric, it could well lead to much more than a bit of disillusionment, as lives can be damaged and important irreplaceable opportunities lost.

For this reason, it is prudent to develop indicators, “markers” or other signs that are generally associated with a degree of serious or credible work on person-centred options for people that goes to matters of performance and substance rather than the kinds of unreliable signs that are too often taken to be reliable when they may be undependable. Just wearing the outward, but ultimately unconvincing, organisational adornments or appearances of person-centred practice may obviously impress some people, but it is important to have markers that are more rigorous and demanding. What are offered here are proposals for what those serious markers are, as well as examples of what may be more unreliable markers of agency seriousness when it comes to following through on convincingly systematic efforts to be person-centred.

Proposed “Markers” of Agency Seriousness in Pursuing Person-Centred Outcomes

- **Board Commitment to a Systematic Changeover from Group/Standardised Models of Support to Solely Individualised Ones**

Though many of the boards of agencies are only decorative in terms of governance, these bodies are the final source of authority and responsibility in legal and duty of care terms regarding agency performance. Consequently, when they commit to a definable changeover from existing service practice to a well-defined change, this indicates a considered position on their part in operational terms. Aspirations and statements that the people they support should have a good life are not enough as these contain no specific agency obligation. However, when an agency says that they will gradually make available solely individualised supports to every person they support on some kind of increasing basis, this is not a trivial commitment, as its performance can be measured both in terms of the shrinking size of its conventional array of supports and its

increasing inventory of individualised support arrangements.

▪ **The Planned and Ongoing Exposure of Staff, Families and Service Users to Above-Average Examples and Thinking as it Relates to the Quality of Individualisation**

It is unusual that most people will be unaffected by exposure to impressive and inspiring examples of what people have done with their lives. It is also normally educational about what went into bringing about such accomplishments. Gradually, it will have the effect of “raising the bar” as to what people should expect of the agency. Keeping people in the dark about what is possible in terms of quality would have the opposite effect of dampening down expectations and shielding the agency from accountability for its claims of what is happening or not in the lives of the people it supports. It is also impressive when an agency invests in an ongoing way in the capacities of its involved people to be able to themselves discern and pursue quality, as this is eventually quite enabling of the actualisation of quality in people’s lives.

▪ **The Evolution of Increasingly Explicit Definitions of What is Good Quality (or Not) in Terms of Person-Centred Options**

When an agency is engaged in explicitly defining what it means to do person-centred supports and lifestyles well, it is inserting into action the means by which their performance can be measured, thereby making them accountable to these. Assuming that they gradually get better at doing this, it will bring pressure to bear on them to have their practice conform to these criteria. It will also enable greater accountability and transparency, since it will enable people to be able to better distinguish between words and deeds. Further, it will tacitly engage many people in an ongoing search for better quality and create unease with quality shortcomings and a legitimate basis for demanding better performance.

▪ **Ongoing Opportunities for People to Master the Content Challenges in Each Area of Meeting Personal Needs**

In an optimal socially-inclusive lifestyle context, the idea underlying most person-centred work is that it will enable a given person to obtain what they need in life to be uniquely fulfilled as a human being. Enabling people to obtain “the good life” is a daunting task in practice because it requires being able to have in place precisely what a given person might need. If the capacity is lacking to do this in the people responsible for supporting this aim, including the contributions of the person, then a gap will open up between what is being sought and needed and what is actually in hand. The acquiring of the capacities to actually deliver on challenging goals will require people to be present in key programmatic roles who have mastered the many tasks involved and can be reliably counted upon to put this into effect with each person to be supported. Typically, there would be many people who are quite attracted to person-centred outcomes. However, this is not enough, as what will be required are people who can routinely generate desirable personalised outcomes and lifestyles with people.

▪ **No New Admissions to Group or Fixed Models of Support; All New Support Arrangements are Individualised**

If the agency continues to grow or enlarge its conventional group models of service, while also trying to develop individualised options, this activity will compete for time, energy, priority and resources with the effort at individualisation. It will also mean that the agency is ideologically incoherent since it is pursuing two mutually exclusive directions simultaneously. If it were genuinely serious about being engaged in individualisation for all people being supported, then

the expansion of group and fixed models of support will contradict and undermine this intention. However, if the more principal aim of the agency is simply empire building, then this practice would be consistent with that agenda, even if it helps to undermine agency's credibility in regards to its claims to be person-centred.

- **Persevering with an Annual Program of Targeted Expansion of People Leaving Center-Based Group Models to Pursue Individualised Supports and Lifestyles**

People do not typically develop individualised lifestyles while still remaining in group or congregate settings. They typically leave such locations and pursue their own lifestyle. It can be quite taxing for both the person and the agency to transform the person's support and lifestyle from a group context to a personalised one and this is more likely to occur if the agency is proactive in creating these opportunities in partnership with the person and those people in their life. An absence of a well-delineated annual effort to generate individualised support will likely mean that the individual is left alone to do this themselves and this would delay the onset of more widespread individualisation. On the other hand, if the agency eases this pathway by providing good transformation supports, the chances of success increase measurably. It also means that the agency is seriously committed to both the “unbundling” of its resources in group models and reusing them exclusively in creating and sustaining individualised options.

- **No “Back Filling” of Vacancies in Established Group Models**

One sure way to preserve rather than diminish the dominance of group models is to continue to fund them. This is what occurs when vacancies created by people leaving such settings for individualised opportunities are “back filled”. This practice ensures that these settings never cease to exist, as replacing vacant spaces with new people perpetuates their existence. On the other hand, if vacancies are allowed to go unfilled, it eventually precipitates the closure of such settings and enables the resources there to move with the person to more individualised uses.

- **Ongoing Partnering with Individuals and Families to Design and Evolve Their Own Life Options**

Though people do need to focus on creating individualised options “from scratch” where none have previously existed for the person, this phase is really only the beginning of what may be many decades of continuous lifestyle evolution as the person's life unfolds and their goals, needs and priorities change with the exigencies of life. If you like, being “person-centred” is an ongoing agency responsibility, as people may need support at any point with their lives and neglect of the person and their potential is always a possibility within personalised support arrangements if they are not done well. People can get “stuck” in their lives at any point and may well need assistance with restarting their lives or to overcome any number of other similar challenges.

- **Good Supports for Individuals and Families to Direct/Govern/Oversee the Ongoing Implementation of Their Support Arrangements**

Though it is not addressed well enough by many commentators on personalised supports, it can be very challenging for many people to successfully carry the responsibilities involved in overseeing the implementation of their personal support arrangements. Few people actually prefer to “self-manage” their own supports as it can be quite burdensome being an administrator, particularly over many years. Hence, agencies that support people to retain a governance role over

their arrangements, but are freed by the agency from undue amounts of bureaucratic obligations, can measurably ease this challenge of “self-direction”. Even so, the task of ensuring that a given person’s will and priorities remain key to how things actually happen in implementation can be more easily achieved if the person is well assisted with the matters that they find most difficult and daunting.

▪ **Careful Internal Monitoring, Correcting and Enhancing of Quality as it is Played Out in Practice**

It is quite easy for quality to slip in any individualised lifestyle and support arrangement, though many of the proponents of person-centred options rarely speak directly to this inevitable hazard. Any agency partnering with individuals within personalised lifestyle and support arrangements that does not steadfastly monitor whether quality is or is not slipping will undoubtedly be caught flatfooted when quality does decline. However, if it expects such shortcomings to be a routine occurrence, then it can act proactively to detect and offset whatever lapses in quality that may arise. This would also signal the degree of determination in a given agency to ensure that the individual supports that it has a duty to uphold are of the best possible quality. To do this it would need to be very vigilant in both monitoring and correcting quality on a timely basis, as well as providing the nurturing of quality that is involved in quality enhancement.

▪ **Agency Commitment to Regularized Authentically Independent and Rigorous Evaluation of Quality**

While it would be praiseworthy for a given agency to be intensely interested in the quality of the personalised supports and lifestyles that it assists with, this should not be the final level of defense of quality since it leaves the agency with considerable discretion in the matter. Nor should the person being supported be left alone with the task of championing quality without access to independent affirmation and validation of quality concerns. It is better if the agency sees that the best way to ensure that quality is what it needs to be is to then provide for a credible independent source of quality evaluation. Such credibility in external evaluation is likely to be higher when the source of this independent evaluation is very rigorous, transparent and principled in regards to quality.

▪ **There is Ample Evidence that People’s Lives are Generally Better in the Individualised Options Supported by the Agency**

Very little will have been accomplished if the person’s life deteriorates once they are ensconced in individualised lifestyles and supports — yet this could eventuate if a poor job is done. On the other hand, if the agency typically upholds the needs and potentials of the people it supports in personalised arrangements, this would be a very strong indicator that, in the end, the agency is a good and reliable performer. If the person is thriving in their lifestyles and support arrangements, this cannot help but reinforce the credibility of the agency as being a serious champion of high quality person-centred outcomes. Further, if corroborating evidence existed that independently supported the existence of these desirable results, then that agency would have a persuasive basis for making the claim that they are indeed “person-centred”.

▪ **Discerning Service Users (and Their Families and Networks) Routinely Vouch for the Agency’s Integrity and Performance**

The people that would be most aware of whether a given agency is actually a good performer

on upholding person-centred outcomes would be the persons being supported and their friends, families and other allies, as they would witness firsthand any shortcomings and deficiencies. Since it is in their lives where the reality of quality or its lack is played out daily, their authority to speak to the agency's performance is considerable, particularly if they are discerning of quality at its highest levels. Consequently, when such persons who might well have valid reasons to be skeptical of the agency are willing to vouch for the agency's high standards, this is high praise and should be given considerable heed. This is all the more true if this kind of testimony is widespread and is sustained over many years, as it indicates a much tested *gravitas* concerning the agency's approach and faithfulness to the quality of all matters that it considers "person-centred".

- **There is Very Little Evidence of the “Walk and Talk” of the Agency Being Different**

One of the most common ways that agency's can get into difficulty with their claims of being "person-centred" is when a gap opens up between their rhetoric and their performance in the direction of underperforming. If this gap is persistent rather than incidental, it essentially means that the agency cannot be believed. Further, if the agency continues to rely on "spin" as the basis of its performance, it is inevitable that a growing number of informed people would begin to have doubts about the agency and its authenticity. Despite the considerable influence that the public relations strategies of manipulating agency image can have, these will ultimately fail to rescue an impostor of person-centredness, as the contradictions in actual conduct will simply become too numerous to cover up. The time between the onset of doubts and their eventual validation may vary, but the end result will always be the same. Boasting without substance is a high risk strategy and is inconsistent with a commitment to words and deeds being in line with each other. Hypocrisy is rarely convincing once it is established to be true.

- **An Agency Emphasis on “Under Promising” and “Over Delivering”**

In contrast to instances when agencies overreach with their claims is the more delightful example of agencies that continually understate their achievements and instead focus upon the continuing challenges of raising the bar with their performance. What makes this impressive is that this both makes the task more difficult for the agency as well as it increases the degree to which the agency is both transparent and demanding of itself. It also reflects the agency's integrity in trying to ensure that any claims it makes are not only real, but conservatively so. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that the agency will understate its accomplishments, since it places actual performance as being central to its identity and makes the evidence of false promises a significant sign that it is not living up to its principles and that a gap between talking and doing is a sign of failure.

Some Obviously Unreliable Signs of Person-Centred Agency Practice

- **The Agency Has or Uses Person-Centred Slogans or Vocabulary**

Though an agency's official buzzwords and slogans may be well intentioned, they are only reliable if they are grounded in dependable practices that result in people actually obtaining good or better lives than they had before. Apparently, many people have difficulty discerning the difference between their fondness for a goal i.e. "person-centredness" with the actualisation of it in practice. Good intentions should not be confused with results, no matter how welcome these intentions are.

- **The Agency Has or Uses Person-Centred Promotional Materials**

We likely now live in a time in which we can produce some of the best quality promotional and public relations material ever crafted in human history. However, being able to create an image of this kind should never be taken as being convincing on the face of it. To be convincing, it must clearly be meticulously measured against what transpires in the lives of the people being supported.

- **The Agency Has or Uses Person-Centred Leaders as Consultants, Trainers or Otherwise Seeks Links with Them**

Most people will have heard the term “guilt by association”, but another term “presumed virtuous by association” might also be useful if an agency is judged to be doing something it is not really doing simply because somewhere in the mix a prominent person-centred leader is engaged by the agency. As always, the real test is what the agency is actually doing on the ground in people’s lives once the celebrity figure has moved on.

- **The Agency Prominently Hosts or Attends Person-Centred Events**

Again, due to the phenomena of “presumed virtue by association”, a given agency may be extensively involved in sponsoring or attending prominent trainings or conferences on person-centred themes and does so sincerely and without guile. Nonetheless, if this does not translate into improved lives for people, it should not be given any credence, as it would be mistaking window dressing for substance. Obviously, some might be impressed, but this “virtue by association” will only impress the naïve and gullible and will eventually come to ensnare the agency in its own deceptive self-portrayal.

- **The Agency Uses a Formal Planning System Labeled “Person-Centred”**

It has been common now for decades for agencies and systems to require annual bureaucratic rituals in relation to personal individualised planning and have incorporated into these many tools that are described as being “person-centred”. Even when these may have praiseworthy elements or intentions, the real test of the agency will again be whether any of this actually results in people’s lives being improved. Their presence alone should not be convincing. In fact, it is quite possible to achieve desirable outcomes without the use of such tools.

- **The Agency has Individual Budgeting and Spending Systems**

In recent decades, much has been made of the presence of individual funding or spending as being essentially equivalent to people getting better lives. This confusion of means and ends does not properly deal with the fact that nominal individual funding can and is being used for very non-individualised practices on the ground. As such, if one looks only at the end result in people’s lives, it would be a better guide as to whether an agency is actually credible in person-centred terms.

- **The Agency has a Few Notable and Well-Publicised Individual Success Stories**

Most certainly, a glamorous and inspiring success story is a welcome addition to any agency. However, it is not unheard of that such stories may be misleading on many essential points and are as such oversold. Also, even if the story is essentially valid, it is illogical to assume that all agency stories will be of the same caliber of quality. If, over many years, they do reach such

a scale as to be pervasive in agency practice, that would be compelling and deserve serious respect.

- **The Agency has (Only) Some Examples of the Routine Individualisation of Supports**

It would be a good sign if an agency systematically offers and delivers reasonably good individualised supports that do make a meaningful improvement in people's lives. However, that is not the same as only offering this to a few people they support. Consequently, an agency will be more credible when greater rather than lesser numbers of people benefit in their lives. When an agency is persistently weak in doing what it claims is important to it, the bloom should go off that rose.

- **The Agency has Received an Award from a Human Service Source for Ostensible "Excellence"**

There are many reasons why a given agency or agency leader may be selected for an award. Often, it is not really known what the basis for the award is, or even whether it was deserved. So, the presence of an award cannot be seen as a reliable guide to the agency's true performance on person-centred matters. However, the lives of the people they support would be a far more dependable source of insight as to whether the agency should be seen as credible. Awards are not always about what they claim to be about, so a measure of skepticism is always advisable in penetrating the real meaning of such symbolic recognitions of agencies and their representatives.

- **The Agency Staff Sincerely Believe that They are Person-Centred**

It is often true that people mean well and try very hard to follow this up with good and occasionally noble work. Nonetheless, unless they are actually getting the results that matter in people's lives, then it is hard to credit them with actual excellence in performance terms. Sincerity is not the same as competence, as most people would prefer a competent surgeon to one that has good intentions, but who cannot be depended upon to do a good job.

- **Some Good People Say that They Think the Agency is Person-Centred**

It is not uncommon in matters of reputation in a community, that people can become convinced that a given agency reputation is deserved. The basis for this conclusion may be sincere and heartfelt, but if they do not square well with actual performance, they will likely reflect a degree of poor judgment. The good character and sincerity of the persons offering such conclusions cannot ultimately be persuasive if the persistent facts contradict the claims being made.

- **Their Conference or Other Presentations and Self Depictions Impress at Least Some People**

It is true that there are many agencies that are doing well on the ground, but lack the ability to convey this impressively to others. Similarly, there are agencies that can impress in their presentations in ways that their actual performance does not justify. Consequently, the impressions gained at such events are not as reliable as would be the examination of actual performance by the agency on the ground.

Conclusion

It may well be that the proposed markers of an authentic agency identified here are not

sufficient to the task, but they may suffice in the absence of rival ways to measure the credibility of what agencies say about themselves and whether these statements are essentially truthful. The issue may not be markers at all, but rather whether a human service culture exists that is dependably able to sort out fact from fiction. Valid markers of authenticity are only useful in the hands of people who will use them well. If we are to eventually do better with this question, it will not be solely through the evolution of valid markers, but rather through the growth in our collective ability to be able to reliably sort out fact from fiction.