

**THE LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKFORCE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECTFULLY EMBEDDING LIVED EXPERIENCE
AT ALL LEVELS OF SERVICE DESIGN AND PRODUCTION**

Trabalhadores com experiência vivida: A importância de respeitosamente incluir pessoas com experiência vivida em todos os níveis de projeto e produção de serviços

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ABSTRACT: The employment of Peer Workers is becoming increasingly common in mental health services. However, the specific employment of people with lived experience in other dedicated roles is far less common. If cultures and outcomes in services are to change for the better, the recruitment of people to dedicated lived experience positions can be an important facilitator of positive change in organizations. Flourish Australia, is a community-managed organization that specializes in mental health support for people in psychological distress and who have a psychosocial disability. Strong, visionary leadership within Flourish Australia has used affirmative action to recruit people with lived experience at all levels of the organization. This has been a successful way to ensure that co-leadership, co-design, and co-production of mental health services are an organizational focus. The outcomes identified are enriched by lived experience, embedded in hope and human rights, recovery, and wellbeing for each individual accessing the service. The respect paid to the lived experience voice at all levels of the organization has ensured positive reforms, enabling visionary, ground breaking ideas to take root and grow. Co-leadership with people with lived experience at all levels of services is the way of the future for mental health and wellbeing services and communities. Flourish Australia has embraced this, and values lived experience. This article demonstrates how co-leadership expands individual and collective minds, lives, services, and

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communities to meet the hopes and needs of people and to break the tyranny of low expectations of people with lived experience.

Keywords: Lived Experience. Workforce. Peer. Wellbeing. Leadership.

RESUMO: Empregar suporte de pares nos serviços de saúde mental está se tornando cada vez mais comum. No entanto, empregar pessoas com experiência de vida em outras funções mais específico é mais raro. Mudar a cultura nos serviços para obter melhores resultados tem sido transformador. Neste sentido, o recrutamento de pessoas com experiência de vida tem proporcionado mudanças importantes e positivas nas organizações. A Flourish Australia é uma organização administrada pela comunidade especializada em apoio à saúde mental para pessoas com sofrimento psíquico e com deficiência psicossocial. A liderança corajosa e visionária da Flourish Australia usou a ação afirmativa para recrutar pessoas com experiência vivida em todos os níveis da organização. Esta tem sido uma experiência bem-sucedida de garantir que a co-liderança, o co-design e a coprodução de serviços de saúde mental sejam um foco organizacional. Os resultados identificados são enriquecidos pela experiência vivida, incorporada na esperança e nos direitos humanos, em recovery e no bem-estar de cada indivíduo que acessa o serviço. O respeito prestado dá voz a experiência vivida em todos os níveis da organização garantindo reformas significativas, permitindo que ideias visionárias e inovadoras criem raízes e cresçam. A co-liderança de pessoas com experiência vivida em todos os níveis de serviços de saúde mental e bem-estar para a comunidade aponta um caminho para o futuro. A Flourish Australia abraçou essa ideia valorizando a experiência vivida. Este artigo demonstra como a co-liderança transforma pensamentos, vidas, serviços e comunidades em nível individual e coletivo rompendo com tiranias e baixas expectativas de pessoas com experiência vivida ao responder às esperanças e necessidades destas pessoas.

Palavras-Chave: Experiência Vivida. Trabalhadores. Pare. Bem-Estar. Liderança

1 INTRODUCTION

Peer Workers are paid employees who have a lived experience of mental health issues which they purposefully utilise to support people experiencing the effects of trauma, mental health challenges and psychosocial disabilities. Peer Workers are becoming increasingly common in mental health services across the world (JACKSON et al., 2020). Experience and research is demonstrating the vital role they play in compassionate services and communities (MEAGHER; NAUGHTIN, 2018; BYRNE, 2018; BYRNE et al., 2018; JACKSON et al., 2020).

However, the purposeful employment of people in other dedicated lived experience roles is far less common. If organisational cultures are to change for

the better in mental health and related human services, the recruitment of people to designated lived experience positions across all levels of the workplace, will be a vital facilitator.

Intentional employment of people with lived experience in the workplace can have a profound impact on the way services are designed, delivered, reviewed and reported upon. It is a litmus test of an organisation's commitment to human rights, mental health recovery, social citizenship and putting its values to work in practical ways.

Supporting people who access services to reach their full potential, to heal, to recover and to embrace social citizenship (embracing all aspects of community life that people without mental health issues take for granted), requires an inclusive workplace with an organisational culture that expects and values lived experience in service design production. It is agile, brave and person-led. Such organisations produce outcomes that make powerful, positive differences in the lives of staff and people who access the service. Flourish Australia has facilitated this culture through the purposeful employment of people with lived experience at all levels of the service.

Employing staff with lived experience at all levels, helps staff and people accessing services to feel safe, valued and empowered. When people with lived experience know they are in a respectful workplace, they become free to be their authentic selves; to reach their full potential. It is liberating to feel safe, valued and open about mental health issues at work (SARNER, 2019).

Alternatively, when people are fearful that knowledge of their lived experience can cause harm or discrimination in the workplace, they may hide this part of themselves and work under a fear of being 'discovered'. This can lead to diminished workplace wellbeing, impact negatively on the individual, their team and the outcomes for people accessing the service.

At Flourish Australia our commitment to employing people with lived experience has led to many positive outcomes:

- A lifting of expectations and hope about possibilities of recovery
- An organisational community with a strong sense of belonging
- Thought leadership in mental health sectors and the co-development of leading edge programs and supports

- Strengthened commitment to human rights, including the right for people with lived experience to be responsible, contributing members of society.

Flourish Australia ascribes to the reforming belief that all organisations should embed lived experience at all levels and stages of service design, delivery, review and reporting. This has a positive impact on workforce culture, practice and outcomes. Flourish Australia have become leaders in the field of purposeful employment of people with lived experience, including front-line peer work positions as well as in other designated lived experience roles including, Board of Directors, Executive and management positions.

We encourage other organisations and communities to transform their culture into one that embraces and values lived experience. This article demonstrates some of the many benefits of achieving this important workplace reform and how co-leadership can expand ideas and improve outcomes. Co-leadership improves the appetite to take well considered risks through brave steps, assertive action and innovation (YANKEE, 2017).

This article also demonstrates that organisations can:

- Purposefully and successfully employ a significant portion of their workforce from the lived experience community
- By doing so, improve the nature of service design and production
- Demonstrate pride in employing staff with lived experience at all organisational levels
- Share leadership with people with lived experience that can be an enriching process producing visionary leadership and improved outcomes.

Flourish Australia, is a not for profit, community managed organisation that specialises in mental health support for people in severe psychological distress, many of whom have 'psychosocial disability' (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2020). Visionary leadership has seen the recruitment of people with lived experience at all levels of the organisation including the Board of Directors, executive level management and senior management in corporate support

functions and in service delivery positions. At 30 June 2020, 54 per cent of 955 employees identified as having a lived experience.

Valuing lived experience has a major role in successfully building and reinforcing an organisational culture that is 'person-led', recovery and social citizenship focused.

Flourish Australia's recognition of the value of lived experience has driven a strategic goal to employ a minimum of 50 per cent of the front-line service delivery staff in paid, mental health peer work positions. Flourish Australia have become leaders in mental health peer work in Australia, with peer work positions making up around 38 per cent of the frontline workforce, with a strategic goal to employ a minimum of 50 per cent of the front-line service delivery staff in peer work positions.

2 BUILDING A LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKFORCE

This success in employing a lived experience workforce is not by accident. It has been an intentional approach involving the exploration of foundational issues such as organisational values with executives and senior managers. It has involved challenging conversations about how these values are demonstrated in service design and recruitment decisions. These important conversations challenged preconceptions, debated decision making processes and led to a workplace culture that embraces lived experience.

An example of these challenging discussions took place between General Managers and Senior Managers. They compared the position descriptions of Peer Workers with those of Mental Health Workers. For each duty listed in the Mental Health Worker position description, it was asked "Why can't a peer worker fulfil that duty?" The respectful debate and discussion led to a recognition that, peer workers can achieve all that mental health workers can, plus they have the 'value add of lived experience'.

Discussions such as this, have led to significant cultural change and growth of the proportion of staff who identify as having a lived experience (JACKSON; FONG, 2018). These conversations have been foundational to our approach and the development of our 'Why Not a Peer Worker? Strategy' (JACKSON; FONG, 2017). This affirmative action strategy consisted of two main policies.

The ‘Why Not a Peer Worker?’[®] Strategy affirmed that for every service delivery position that became available, hiring managers must apply the question “Why not a Peer Worker for this position?”. Challenging hiring managers to justify why a peer worker could not fulfil the tasks of the role proved to be very effective. In Flourish Australia’s experience, there were very few circumstances that would justify not appointing a peer worker to a position (JACKSON; FONG, 2017).

The forementioned strategy has seen our Peer Workforce grow from 22 Peer Workers to currently 215.

The second part of growing our lived experience workforce was to invite existing staff who identified as having lived experience to transform their Mental Health Worker role to a Peer Worker role. Those who applied undertook a rigorous application and interview process. This is imperative as Peer Worker roles are professional roles that keep the fidelity and values of peer work strong. The respect paid to the lived experience voice at all levels of the organisation has enabled positive reforms and ground breaking ideas to establish and grow. The lived experience voice has been the center in the writing of our Strengths-Based Language Guide (Flourish Australia, 2018), in decision making, policy development, communications, service design, delivery, reviewing and reporting (BEATTIE et al., 2013).

Some examples of lived experiences voices being included in all aspects of service design and production are the Members of the Community Advisory Council and lived experience staff working with executive staff and managers to co-produce:

- the Flourish Australia Measurement and Evaluation Framework
- the Co-Design Guidelines and Policies
- the Strategic Plan 2020-2023
- the COVID-19 Response Plan

The organisation’s commitment to ensuring lived experience at all levels drives our commitment to true co-design and co-production (ROPEE et al., 2018; GOURLAY et al., 2019). It ensures transparent sharing of experiences, expertise, knowledge and the recognition that people with lived experience of mental health issues often have a multitude of professional experience to draw from.

For example, one member of the Flourish Australia Community Advisory Council was a manager of an international IT company, and the current General Manager, Inclusion, has worked as a Peer Worker, Manager and Deputy Mental Health Commissioner; both identify as being ‘voice hearers’.

The Flourish Australia Community Advisory Council is an example of valuing lived experience in the workplace. The Council consists entirely of people who access Flourish Australia services. They are paid for their valuable time and wisdom and work in partnership with the Executive team; together they facilitate strong co-leadership, co-design and co-production of our services. As a result, outcomes are enriched by lived experience and embedded in hope, human rights, recovery and wellbeing.

3 CHALLENGES

Good co-design is often not easy or fast. It requires patience of all stakeholders. People who have never ‘heard voices’, must learn to work respectfully with people who are contributing to the discussions while being interrupted by ‘their voices’.

Another challenge often experienced by Flourish Australia is that initially, some external collaborators may be ‘affronted’ by the idea that, while they may have a doctorate and seen as ‘very important leaders’ in mental health, they are seen as equal with co-designers who may have little formal education and who are obviously impacted by trauma and psychological challenges.

A generosity of spirit and respect is required of all participants in order for every person to feel safe, valued and equal. The organization takes time to let people bring forth their wisdom and experiences from amidst the voices inside their minds. It takes time to explain everything to people who are unable to read and write. It helps professionals recognise that they can learn and contribute extensively by letting others speak. There is no room for ego and competition in co-design; there can only be respect, open minds, equality, and a focus on solutions present in the co-design process.

4 LIVED EXPERIENCED LEADERSHIP ROLES

Achieving reform requires leadership. Flourish Australia endeavours to be a good community leader. Describing our approach to inclusion and the value we

place on lived experience is important so that others may be inspired. To achieve what we need to do, lived experience leaders, champions and allies are required throughout the organisation.

We believe leaders are not only in traditional 'positions of power', they are at all levels in all Flourish Australia services. Co-leadership with staff with lived experience and people accessing services is an approach that has worked well for the organisation (Flourish Australia, 2020; JACKSON et al., 2020).

If we are to achieve the required reforms to services, it is an essential component of the future of mental health and related services and communities.

The positive impact of lived experience leadership positions on organisational culture cannot be overestimated. These positions not only ensure lived experience is at the most senior decision making tables, they are a visible expression of the organisation's commitment to co-design and co-production. They are an example to people with lived experience, that leadership positions are something they can achieve.

Flourish Australia's commitment to have people with lived experience at all levels is evidenced by the Board of Directors. Board Directors with lived experience are valued for both their lived and professional experience, just as those with backgrounds in psychiatry, law, management, financial management and family and carer experience are. A diverse and inclusive Board ensures all aspects of decisions can be explored and interrogated, resulting in the best possible decisions being made.

Ensuring the voice of lived experience and experience as a service user in all discussions, ensures the organisation's values are demonstrated in decision making; and that these decisions always consider how people's lives are made better as a result. This approach supports the Board's role as the guardians of the organisation's culture. It is an example of how the Board drives and models partnership with people with lived experience across all levels of the organisation.

The General Manager, Inclusion is another example of lived experience leadership in the organisation's structure. This important executive role is a designated lived experience role. It has organisation-wide oversight to ensure Flourish Australia is person-led and is living its values day to day. It is an expectation of this role for the incumbent to use their lived experience

purposefully and appropriately in all aspects of service co-design, co-production and co-research.

This lived experience organisational leadership, the daily interactions with the people accessing services, the Community Advisory Council and all lived experience staff, ensures the essential ingredient in co-production of services that deliver what is needed by people.

Co-production and co-design promotes innovative and creative thinking. It drives the inclusion of lived experience wisdom generously and bravely offered by the diverse voices of people who access Flourish Australia's services, staff and communities in which we work and serve.

The General Manager, Inclusion is also an external ambassador promoting new, inclusive and respectful approaches to mental health services through the mental health and human services sector. The incumbent sits on multiple collaborative committees, steering groups and working parties at state and national levels including the National Mental Health Commission's Vision2030 Strategic Plan Steering Committee, the National Consumer and Carer Reference Group and is a Board Member of Being – Mental Health Consumers, the New South Wales Lived Experience (consumer) peak organization.

This dual inward and outward focus of the General Manager, Inclusion, along with the CEO and other Executive managers, ensures sharing of knowledge and mutually beneficial relationships with collaborators and partners. The collaborative approach promotes a generosity of spirit, models the fact that people with lived experience can be great leaders and demonstrates the valuing of, and pride in lived experience.

There are also lived experience leaders throughout the organisation, in formal management positions, and in other positions within teams at the front-line of service delivery, as well as in corporate support functions. This wide distribution of lived experience ensures that these voices influence discussions forging positive differences to the organisation and quality of service delivery. Some of these roles include the Peer Workforce Manager, Specialist Peer Workers, Team Co-ordinators, Inclusion Project Officer and Senior Managers.

Lived experience leaders and their allies often need to engage in respectful but challenging conversations. They explore preconceptions, call out

stigma and discrimination, have open minds to new ideas, are brave in the pursuit of reforms and educate and inspire people. This has resulted in major service changes and improvements within Flourish Australia such as the aforementioned 'Why Not A Peer Worker?'[®] Strategy', Co-Design Guidelines, and the development of the Social Citizenship Framework.

The involvement of lived experience leaders in these conversations has been an important catalyst, and a reminder of the values and purpose of the organisation. People with lived experience and their allies have lifted the focus and conversations about mental health service delivery from what has always been done, to what must change, what is possible, dignified risks and the recognition that all processes and planning must be 'person-led'.

5 VICTIMS OF COMFORT

Sometimes, the conversations and decisions needed to improve service delivery and individuals outcomes requires stakeholders to be brave enough to take considered, dignified risks. This is because change rarely occurs when people are comfortable. Often people receiving services are victims of a service's comfort and the desire for workplaces and communities to remain undisturbed. Sadly, this 'comfort' can reinforce the 'discomfort and marginalisation' of people with lived experience.

Good leaders are purposeful, honourable disrupters that envision and lead positive change.

Flourish Australia shows commitment to not being content with the status quo or our own comfort. The importance of this commitment is shown in the multiple reviews in Australian Federal and State Government Commissions and reports that have made it clear that services have not fulfilled the needs of the people who are subject to them (Australian Productivity Commission, 2020; National Mental Health Commission, 2014; New South Wales Ministry of Health, 2017).

The organization has constantly looked for ways to improve services for those who ask for support. It is clear from experience that conversations and decisions led by people with lived experience are mutually beneficial for the individual and the organisation (Flourish Australia, 2020). Having people with lived experience at the core of the organisation, in combination with our

commitment to co-design, ensures the organisation is always developing and improving. The promise made is to support people to live the best life they can and to claim their social citizenship.

6 PERSONAL SITUATION PLANS

Supporting people with lived experience at all levels of the organisation requires open conversations about the support required to ensure people feel confident to fulfil their role. Each person's circumstances are taken into account. For staff, this is provided for in a Personal Situation Plan.

These plans are used to support staff with lived experience, but are also used to support staff with physical health, disabilities and carer responsibilities who may need additional flexibility to deal with personal circumstances (BEATTIE et al., 2013; Flourish Australia, 2014).

The plans are voluntary. What and who is included in the plan is led by the staff member who is supported by their manager and other chosen colleagues. The availability of this plan is made known to staff as part of their induction and they are invited to plan ahead, to let their manager know how they can best support them to perform their job well.

The General Manager, Inclusion speaks about this plan to new employees at Staff Engagement Days. They model the power these plans have in keeping people well and feeling safe in the workplace by purposefully sharing details their plan. They explain how their manager (the CEO) and colleagues used the plan to navigate situations and how utilising the plan has enabled them to keep working with small adjustments to their duties until the crisis passed. An Executive manager utilising their lived experience purposefully in this way demonstrates the psychological safety people can enjoy and the respect and value Flourish Australia pays to lived experience.

Personal Situation Plans are empowering for managers and work colleagues. They ensure that the people involved are on the same page, and that there is clear guidance about how to address any issues that may arise. In this way, the person remains in control, and the guessing is removed for everyone.

Personal Situation Plans for someone with lived experience may include such elements as:

- What their triggers are, how to stop or minimise their impact

- The signs that the staff member may be struggling
- The responsibility of the person, as well as the manager and colleagues chosen by the person
- External partners, supporters, family members, and possibly clinicians the person can call upon for support
- Instructions of what to do
- It may also include people **not** to be notified and what not to do
- Plans for how the staff member could continue working, possibly with adjusted duties.

This information can ensure that someone can remain at work while performing their duties, or return in the shortest possible time.

7 COUNTERING BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

In pursuing a growth of lived experience employees in organisations, it is helpful to consider the conscious or unconscious bias and discrimination experienced by people with lived experience. Some of this bias is based in myth and fear. Some of these relate to an employee's 'symptoms', concerns about a 'lack of resilience', and not being able to work when experiencing the hearing of voices. Concerns can also pertain to not being able to drive; the ability to complete shift work; not being able to work full-time; maintaining boundaries, and fears that staff may have difficulty learning complicated tasks and concepts.

In Flourish Australia's experience, there is no evidence that these issues are any more common in staff with lived experience than other staff. Lived experienced staff at all levels are capable, reliable, committed team members whose dedication and bravery have improved the organisation's culture and outcomes (JACKSON; FONG , 2018).

Flourish Australia enjoys a reputation of leading the inclusion of people with lived experience in all aspects of mental health and related services. This is evidenced by invites actions from collaborators and partners to include our Flourish Australia Council Members, lived experience staff in collaborative work such as the Lived Experience Workforce Framework (Mental Health Commission of New South Wales,2018).

Employing people with lived experience at all levels of mental health services, greatly improves workplace culture. Flourish Australia's experience demonstrates the benefits of such an approach to service development and the delivery of personal outcomes for people accessing supports; with flexibility and important consideration. Mental health services' commitment to recovery is demonstrated and reinforced by establishing and supporting lived experience leadership roles. Seeing someone with experience like yours is a tangible expression of hope for a different future, and can be an important contributor to lifting expectations about what is possible for individuals and organisations alike.

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