COMMUNITY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE WORKERS

Campfire Co-op and Red Thread Stories Australia Inc were engaged by Brisbane South PHN to develop and test a community of practice for lived experience workers in the region, and create a framework from what we learned in this pilot project. The project began in February 2019, and finished in July 2019. Workshops with participants / members were held from March to June.

Our target audience were people with a lived experience of mental health who are working (paid or volunteer) in the Brisbane South region - focussing on those working in small organisations without lived experience support.

DESCRIPTION

What we did

Here is what we identified in our project design:
Purpose: Develop and test a community of practice for workers with lived experience of mental health issues to support each other and learn together.
Our guiding question: How can we best guide the co-creation of a lived experience workforce community of practice that supports people to flourish?
Desired tangible outcomes (harvest)
- A sustainable Community of Practice
- A Community of Practice framework

Desired intangible outcomes (harvest)
- Capable and confident Community of Practice (CoP) members
- CoP members have stronger connections and relationships
- Engaged, motivated and inspired participants
- Participants enjoy a good experience of participatory process

We connected to almost 100 organisations, communities and individuals from the community sector in Brisbane South region through email, phone and face to face conversations. We also used social media to invite participants, promote the project and bring awareness of the importance of better supporting lived experience workforce.

Six workshops were held in different community locations across the Brisbane South region.

Workshop 1: Exploring what our community could be
26 & 27 March 2019
23 participants connected and shared stories, discovered what was needed to inform the next 5 workshops, and named their Community of Lived Experience Workers: CLEW. They learned skills and information about participatory leadership and games and activities for connection and engagement.

Workshop 2: Co-designing our community
1 May 2019
In this first three hour workshop, eight lived experience workers visioned their future CLEW, and using the Groundwork framework, developed strong foundations - our purpose, who we are and how we work together, what we hope to create and some key priorities for the future.

Workshop 3: Speaking up
15 May 2019
In a safe, supportive space 13 participants shared stories, learned new skills and grew in confidence to speak up at work and in our lives.

Workshop 4: Designing projects
15 May 2019
Eight participants came together to practice co-design with two projects: CLEW comms - keeping connected, and Taking care of the CLEW crew: the wellbeing of the group.

Workshop 5: How to host a participatory meeting
26 June 2019
9 participants came together to learn more hosting tips for powerful meetings, step up to practice hosting and making wise decisions about CLEW's future.

Workshop 6: Celebration and Storytelling
26 June 2019
Eleven participants (nine CLEW members) shared stories, experienced Playback Theatre with Red Thread Stories, celebrating where they had come from what to take forward. They also made clear commitments to CLEW going forward.

We evaluated and themed the data we received from participants in the project, as well as our own reflections and learnings. We also took a developmental approach, embedding learning into the project design. Participants co-created their community throughout the workshop series, and developed capacity and skills along the way.

We also created and shared 'harvests' from each workshop to share with participants, their organisations and more widely, through newsletters and the project website, and a digital story completed at the end of the project, to sit alongside this summary, and the final report.

How we did it

We had a clear intention of the way we approached this work:

- We designed the first two-day workshop, to discover what participants needed and wanted for the next five events, and respond to that
- We used, modelled and encouraged highly participatory methods, with self organising and shared leadership principles, and taking a living systems approach to building a community.
- We used multi modal approaches to cater for diverse learning styles in the workshops - including conversation, play and games, visual harvesting, storytelling, playback theatre and more, choosing approaches that best suited the purpose.
- We had a core team of three, who co-designed, hosted, harvested and reflected upon each stage of the project. This is not work to be done alone. We called in others within our organisations to support as needed.

Core frameworks and practices we used were The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter, Sociometry and Action Methods, Playback Theatre, Groundwork and associated mental models, methods and tools and practices.

For the overall project, we used the Chaordic Stepping Stones to co-design and Groundwork to build the structure for the project, paying attention to all aspects of creating a good foundation for future sustainability.

FINDINGS

By the end of the pilot a core group of nine CLEW members were strongly committed to continuing a sustainable Community of Practice. They began as workshop participants and became confident members of CLEW. Together they named, designed and built a strong foundation for their Community of Practice. Overwhelmingly they developed stronger connections and support and found the participatory processes both engaging and useful in their work.

After each activity:
- **98.5% people felt more connected**
- **95.5% felt more supported in their role**
- **97% felt more able to speak up**
- **95.5% felt more knowledgeable about communities of practice**

"I feel like I belong here, I've made friends. And I'm excited!"

"There's a lot of acceptance here, people can be who they are, turn up as who they are. Laughter, support, listening, being heard."

"I would approach the people I work with differently with a more open mind. I will speak up and express my opinions and share ideas and be more open to others opinions and ideas and I will have more confidence."

"With CLEW, I feel that my status as a lived experience worker is valid and valuable, and that I can reach out for support in relation to this when needed. With CLEW, I feel supported to not just attend work but to thrive at work."

What we learned from participants

We themed qualitative data gathered from participants over the course of the project, through written evaluations, verbal feedback, stories shared, emailed feedback and recorded interviews. Here's what we learned:

- **Ongoing contribution and commitment** The need for a Community of Lived Experience Workers was evidenced in participants' commitment,
- **Connection** CLEW is a place for connection from which belonging, learning, inspiration occurs.
- **Safe and Supportive Space** Creating support and safety is of great importance and has benefits beyond CLEW.
- **Working Together** Working together well creates positive action and momentum.
- **Building Shared Purpose** Developing a shared purpose together is key to creating ownership and commitment.
- **Method** The processes used in running groups is critical to engagement and purposeful outcomes.
- **Capacity** Experiential learning encouraged opportunities to build capacity and apply skills in different contexts.
- **Value and impact of CLEW** Recognising CLEW's impact on people's lives and broader system

Team reflections and learnings

- **Initial Engagement** Personal Invitation is important, takes time, and engages people.
- **Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** The engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is based on connections and relationships which requires ongoing intentional focus, and time.
- **Welcoming** Creating a welcoming culture rubs off on others.
- **Location** Changing locations frequently can be unsettling.

- **Modelling** Model the skills you want people to learn: Modelling a culture creates that culture.
- **Capacity building** Step by step build opportunities for people to learn by doing.
- **Using different modalities** Take the time to introduce different creative modalities. It leads to quality outcomes.
- **Ownership and transparency** Open harvest led to group ownership.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

It's critical that the team supporting the Community of Practice model the principles and practices and build capacity in the group at all times.

From these findings and reflections, based on the success of our approach, we are able to articulate eight essential elements to support the development of other communities of practice for lived experience workers. *See Framework on Page 5*

Clear purpose

"Collective clarity of purpose is the invisible leader"- Mary Parker Follett

The purpose of any group or project is its contribution towards fulfilling the need that exists. A clear and shared purpose can help hold the community steady and focussed on what really matters especially when things get wobbly - 'Why are we doing this again?'. Developing a shared purpose together is key to creating ownership and commitment.

PRINCIPLES
- Emergent and evolving
- It takes time
- Shared clarity and connection

PRACTICES
- Emergent and evolving
- It takes time
- Shared clarity and connection

The art of invitation

"Inviting people into anything, including a Community of Practice, is an art. It's important to pay attention to how you attract people fully to whatever it is that you're doing. Invitation begins long before the formal invitation is issued. It is a way of being more than a printed flyer or a website. If invited well, people choose to show up open, curious and enthusiastic.

PRINCIPLES
- Who we are and how we show up in the world is the biggest invitation there is.
- How we invite others will determine how they show up.
- We tend to trust invitations from people who are like us

PRACTICES
- Make it personal
- A clear invitation
- The conversation begins long before the meeting starts
- Meet people where they're at
- Embodied

Relationships matter

The strength of relationships within a CLEW will impact the strength of the whole. This includes our relationship with ourselves. To support each other, and do good work together, it's important to build connection and trust. This is critical at the beginning stages, and over time, as new participants arrive, and as people leave too.

PRINCIPLES
- It takes time and attention
- Once you know someone's story, you will see them as human
- Design to strengthen relationships
- Ask for what you need and offer what you can

PRACTICES
- Self Awareness
- Practice conversation
- Define shared principles for collaboration
- Focus on what matters
- Explore your limiting beliefs

Shared leadership

Command and control and hierarchy can create challenges when communities of peers work together. Shared leadership is stepping up when something needs doing, and stepping back to allow others to lead. Sharing responsibility. The power of people being involved in change, solutions and decisions cannot be underestimated. It allows for better ideas, solutions, decisions and builds capacity, relationships and sense of contribution at the same time.

PRINCIPLES
- Never work alone
- People support what they create
- People act responsibly when they care
- We're better together

PRACTICES
The Four Fold Practice. One practice with four parts:
- Host yourself
- Participate
- Invite others
- Host each other and co-create together

Design for diversity

"Participants have many different cultural backgrounds, abilities and learning styles. Using diverse tools and modes that work for a variety of learning preferences enhances the ability for all voices to contribute in a process. These range from conversation, written work, action methods, games, drawing and story, and from individual reflection to working in pairs, small groups and the whole group.

PRINCIPLES
- Much of what people communicate is done without words
- Diversity leads to better outcomes
- Stepping out of our comfort zone can bring surprising and valuable insights

PRACTICES
- Allow time and space for diverse processes
- Make patterns and relationships visible and explicit
- Create opportunities to 'get out of your head'
- Ask how else can this be done?
- We can't get it wrong

Intentional harvest

You're not planning a meeting or a project, you're planning a harvest. The Community of Practice is nothing without the results its creates. What are the intangible things (passion, trust, commitment and connectedness of relationship etc) you wish to harvest from the CoP? What are the tangible things (decisions, actions, newsletters etc)? A harvest is the collective memory and learning of a group, and when fed forward into the system, and put to good use, it can help make the group wiser over time. It is a more powerful practice if it is done collectively by the group, and made visible.

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PRINCIPLES
- Participatory
- Learning
- Useful
- Multi-modal
- Emergent

PRACTICES
- Design from harvest
- Make it clear
- Feed it forward

Structures that serve

Create the lightest possible structures consciously, that serve people, relationships and getting work done. Helpful structures are those that create flexibility, spaciousness and flow. Unhelpful structures limit freedom, flexibility and flow. What structures are needed and how will we organise ourselves within them? How we make decisions? How and when will we meet? How will we get done what needs to get done, without resorting to one or two people doing everything.

PRINCIPLES
- Seek simplicity
- Build capacity to build capacity
- We humans are capable of self-organising given the right conditions
- Structures can set you free
- Be over-prepared and under-structured

PRACTICES
- Establish a rhythm and practice for meeting well
- Hosted Meetings
- Create a comfortable physical space
- Develop an organisational structure
- Communicate well

Act, reflect and integrate

Action is often the first step that people rush to when there is a challenge or need. In complexity, when you can't plan for exact outcomes, a different approach is needed. Take small steps, to reflect and integrate what we've learned. 'Do more of what works, and less of what doesn't.' What actions are we taking and how will we integrate learning to improve both how we do it and the results and impact over time?
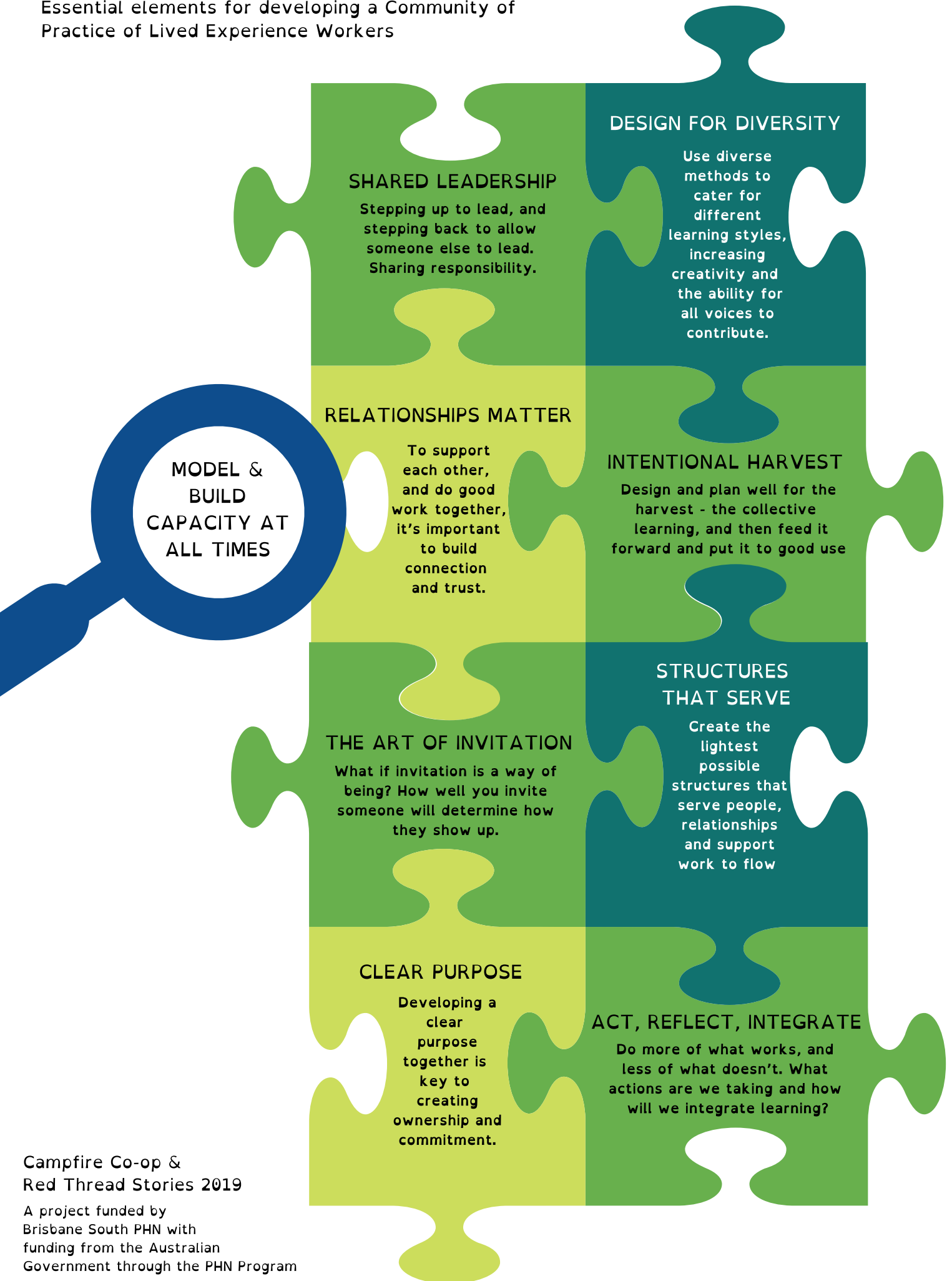
PRINCIPLES
- Focus on what works
- Does it grow corn for the people?
- All the answers do not exist 'out there'
- Flexibility and continuous learning

PRACTICES
- Sense what is needed
- Choose your timing well
- Project leadership and management
- Safe to fail experiments
- Reflect on what you are learning, document and share it

CLEW Framework

Essential elements for developing a Community of Practice of Lived Experience Workers

MODEL & BUILD CAPACITY AT ALL TIMES

SHARED LEADERSHIP

Stepping up to lead, and stepping back to allow someone else to lead. Sharing responsibility.

DESIGN FOR DIVERSITY

Use diverse methods to cater for different learning styles, increasing creativity and the ability for all voices to contribute.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

To support each other, and do good work together, it's important to build connection and trust.

INTENTIONAL HARVEST

Design and plan well for the harvest - the collective learning, and then feed it forward and put it to good use

THE ART OF INVITATION

What if invitation is a way of being? How well you invite someone will determine how they show up.

STRUCTURES THAT SERVE

Create the lightest possible structures that serve people, relationships and support work to flow

CLEAR PURPOSE

Developing a clear purpose together is key to creating ownership and commitment.

ACT, REFLECT, INTEGRATE

Do more of what works, and less of what doesn't. What actions are we taking and how will we integrate learning?