

# **LEARNING TO GROW**

## **No simple formulas**

A short report prepared by **Common Knowledge** in co-operation with **Colchester Women's Aid**, reviewing some central issues of governance and management on which they worked together

Dr June Freeman  
Chair  
CWA

Bernard Spiegel  
Common Knowledge

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## **1. Introduction**

1.1 In October 1999, Colchester Women's Aid (CWA) initiated a review of its governance and management. With the assistance of a grant from the Charities Aid Foundation, they commissioned an NCVO Approved Consultant to support the process.

1.2 CWA at that time was emerging from a period of internal tension that culminated in a number of staff leaving the organisation. This had left trustees and staff, to varying degrees, bruised and angry. Ending this period of conflict freed those left in the organisation to start to thinking with new energy and urgency about the future. They decided it was time they reviewed their system of governance and management. They therefore appointed a consultant.

1.3 At the same time the organisation was directing its not inconsiderable energies into lobbying and planning for the acquisition of a second house to meet the high demand for its services, setting up resettlement and outreach schemes and helping to develop an inter-agency perpetrators project, the organisation set about ensuring its governance and management was in good order, fit for the purposes it had set itself. They began a series of meetings with Common Knowledge.

## **2. Theory, what theory?**

2.1 People not infrequently believe that the work of governing and managing can be reduced to the application of standard techniques to particular situations; that what is required is a body of techniques which can be definitively identified and learned, perhaps through attendance at an appropriate training course. This narrow, reductive technical approach is bolstered by various management theories that underpin the plethora of 'how to' manuals.

2.2 This view is reflected the number metaphors deployed in such manuals speaking about organisations: the idea that organisations can be 'engineered', and even 're-engineered' or 'reconfigured'. Behind such talk is the idea of organisations as machines, or as forms of computer-based information technology where the discourse is in terms of 'systems', 'flows' and 'feedback'.

2.3 Management theory thus conceived posits an abstracted organisational capacity to generate rules or standardised paradigms for a twofold application: first, to categorise a situation against a pre-existing model; second, once categorised, to apply the appropriate rule of response to the situation. But governing and managing is not like this.

2.4 Governing and managing is the process of making substantive judgements - choices - in conditions of uncertainty. Making judgements cannot be reduced to the application of a rule.

2.5 Therefore the consultant's task was to assist the organisation address this issue while also helping it to speak confidently to and about itself.

### **3. Ideology and values**

3.1 This is not the place to undertake a critique of either left leaning ideology in general or the women's aid movement in particular. However, as the Chair of CWA has noted, 'CWA's values and organisational approach were still heavily influenced by certain forms of 1960s popular and populist thinking'.

3.2 Charities formed in the 1960s and 1970s were often rooted, whether explicitly or not, in a collectivist ideology. Organisations espousing these values were prone to pay scant attention to issues of legal authority, the roles and responsibilities of trustees and related questions. On the other hand it can also be argued that the forward thrust of commitment and political passion created sufficient momentum to render such considerations distractions from the urgent tasks at hand.

3.3 Together with this 'populist thinking', CWA's activities were underpinned by a feminist and social critique that continue to inform its work today. This feminist stance, now perhaps augmented by a human rights perspective, is the critical core of the organisation in contrast to organisations that espouse a generalwelfarist approach to social ills.

3.4 At the beginning some members were apprehensive that, in developing a more robust and coherent structure of governance and management, CWA's core values would be diluted, changing the organisation. Such misgivings proved to be misplaced.

3.5 Clarifying for itself the roles and responsibilities of the different layers of the organisation, CWA created the conditions that allowed for a more systematic and explicit articulation of organisational core values. This is very much work in progress as CWA works to promote its values both internally and in its relationships with outside bodies.

### **4. Relationships of trust.**

4.1 As has been said, governance and management are about making judgements. By definition, judgements are never certain, are largely contestable, subjective and subject to error.

4.2 Organisations - communities of choice-makers - must create the conditions that allow for judicious risk-taking. An organisation that is risk-averse is neither managing

nor acting responsibly, though it may think it is; rather, it is comatose.

4.3 Judicious risk-taking requires as its precondition an understanding of key elements of charity law and the fostering of relationships based on trust. These foundations encourage:

consistent application of values and principles

an understanding of how authority is distributed and where it ultimately rests

a culture of learning that fosters a spirit of enquiry and self-reflection

a culture of openness and transparency in respect of information about the charity (distinct from information that must properly be kept confidential, for example, staff and clients' records).

## **5. The consultancy process**

5.1 Central to Common Knowledge's approach is the understanding that judgement cannot be taught: "The skills of a judge, or the skills of a critic, can be used or misused; justice or the critical spirit can be neither used nor misused. And this is because neither being just nor being critical is a skill." (J. Passmore, On Teaching to be Critical)

5.2 As judgement cannot be taught an organisational culture which fosters conversation, dialogue and the questioning of ideas is critical to the decision making process. The consultancy process enabled CWA to learn from itself and others.

5.3 It would be possible to describe the process of review in terms of the decisions taken by the organisation; for example, the changes in organisational structure or decisions made about CWA's logo. Such decisions are significant but represent, so to speak, a secondary expression of organisational life.

5.4 This capacity had existed in the organisation well before the involvement of the consultant. However, the review process created the opportunity for the organisation to take a more sustained, critical look at itself. The consultant's role was one of 'sceptical friend'; more sounding board than source of technical expertise.

5.6 Nor is there any mystery about the consultancy methods deployed: workshops; interviews; conversations; argument; discussion and position papers.

5.7 Reviews of the type undertaken here require the commitment of key people within the organisation. The consultancy process benefited hugely from the focused, positive but critical, commitment of CWA's Chair.

## **6. Outcomes**

6.1 The consultancy process helped CWA to draw out the latent capacity of its

voluntary members and a number of staff. The past year has seen significant changes in the organisation, changes that justify characterising CWA as a learning organisation.

6.2 This is apparent in some of CWA's activity which has run parallel to the consultancy process. Over the past year CWA has:

reached an agreement with two local authorities and a housing association over the enlargement of the residential facilities

introduced a new corporate image and publicity material

inaugurated a short training course on domestic violence for qualified social workers

developed a formal statement of organisational values and principles

organised sending two staff to the USA to see how domestic violence is handled there.

## **7. Custom, tradition and change**

7.1 What has briefly been described here is the way one organisation - Colchester Women's Aid - examined its purpose and practice. The process could be characterised as a dialogue between continuity and change.

7.2 Core values were reaffirmed, but within the context of a widening debate about, for example, human rights.

7.3 Governance and management practice changed, and continues to change, but within the context of an established, yet vibrant, tradition. Michael Oakshott<sup>1</sup> has something to say about this:

*"Custom is always adaptable and susceptible to the nuance of a situation. This may appear a paradoxical assertion; custom, we have been taught, is blind. It is, however, an insidious piece of misobservation; custom is not blind, it is only 'blind as a bat'. And anyone who has studied a tradition of customary behaviour (or a tradition of any sort) knows that rigidity and instability are foreign to its character. And secondly, this form of the moral life is capable of change as well as local variation. Indeed, no traditional way of behaviour, no traditional skill, ever remains fixed; its history is one of continuous change'.*

7.4 In organisational life, all 'solutions' are partial and temporary. The management of organisations is not susceptible to the language of finality.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in 'The idea of social science and its relationship to philosophy', Peter Winch, published by Routledge.

Common Knowledge  
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Colchester Women's Aid