

Agents of change

Little can be achieved in improving the way drug workers do their job without the help of their managers, says **Carole Sharma**.

The one resource that actually delivers treatment, the workforce, is at long last being given some prominence. The 2010 government drug strategy acknowledged that those in the drug field are working together to “develop an inspirational recovery orientated workforce; promoting a culture of ambition and a belief in recovery”. We are working on national standards, competency requirements and making as many staff development resources available as possible.

After all, it's pretty grim coming to work each day if you don't believe that what you do is making a difference. It is time to fully develop these aptitudes and competencies so that drug and alcohol users can have confident, able, knowledgeable practitioners who can work in partnership with them on their recovery journey.

One of my concerns is that we are focussing too much on practitioners without consideration for the framework in which they practice. Concentrating solely on the competencies of the face-to-face practitioners will not deliver the required outcome. It will be unsustainable if we do not at the same time ensure that we develop managers to support and guide the practitioners. A wonderful practitioner may quickly become jaded and operate below par if they are not challenged, supported, praised, and valued for what they do. So if we are going to deliver recovery then we urgently need to consider the development needs of managers and team leaders.

Yet this is a difficult task in an environment where the rhetoric is all about maintaining front line services and cutting so-called 'back office' functions. Those in a management role already have a lot on their plate, but for services to be effective, managers will need to prioritise the support and supervision of the practitioners.

I feel the agents of change in the culture of treatment services are the

managers. And they do this by leadership and providing a learning environment within the workplace. They are able to nurture development by good quality case management, examination and audit of practice and ensuring that practitioners are working in a viable and meaningful partnership with their clients.



THE DRUG AND ALCOHOL SECTOR SHOULD CONSIDER DEVELOPING THE ROLE OF 'SENIOR PRACTITIONER' TO PROVIDE MENTORING, TEACHING AND SUPERVISION TO OTHERS

So do we need specific drug and alcohol service management qualifications? In a nut shell, no we do not. But we do need managers who are trained to manage and who can be liberated from case work to concentrate on overseeing the delivery of services and the needs of the practitioners in those services.

There are plenty of nationally recognised qualifications in management for health and social care (see below), which will prepare individuals to manage teams or organisations. Most universities provide management courses which are relevant. But a need does exist for the development

of additional training for qualified managers to contextualise their skills, in terms of delivering a recovery-focussed workforce. This would be a useful piece of work for the newly constituted Skills Consortium to undertake.

Workforce development is a tall order for service managers to take on – so the time is right to look at how we can best achieve this. Our sector tends to have relatively flat career structures, where you are either a manager or a practitioner. This has been an historical problem across health and social care. The nursing sector has tried to alleviate this by having such roles as 'clinical nurse specialists' in an attempt to reward very good practitioners and keep them in touch with clinical work.

The drug and alcohol sector should consider developing the role of 'senior practitioner' to provide mentoring, teaching and supervision to others, as well as good quality case work. Senior practitioners should also play an important role in maintaining the positive culture within the service.

We are facing hard times in the near future where we are all going to have to do more with fewer resources, so we need to be smarter with the resources we do have and make sure we use them effectively. I believe that time spent building a management system which truly supports the practitioners will give us the dividend we require, namely, services which are recovery-focussed and are valued and cherished by drug and alcohol users, their loved ones and the communities in which we work.

■ **Carole Sharma** is Chief Executive of the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals

Awarding bodies for qualifications in management appropriate to the sector are: www.city-and-guilds.co.uk; www.ediplc.com; www.ocr.org.uk and www.open.ac.uk/shsw