Using Social Marketing to Improve Community Cohesion: An Evaluation of an Innovative Communications Training Programme in the East End of London

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Abstract

This paper discusses the design and implementation of a staff development programme in The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD). LBBD applied a social marketing approach and model developed by Fowlie and Wood (2008) with the aim of improving community cohesion. The programme comprises skills training which should enable front-line staff to communicate effectively, and have "deeper conversations", with residents. The paper presents evaluation research – a telephone survey of 450 participants supplemented with two focus groups - which explores the effectiveness of the programme. Evaluating the effectiveness of social marketing is particularly important in the current economic and political climate. The paper concludes that the programme has been effective in improving communication skills, particularly "active listening", and internal and external relationships.

Keywords: Community cohesion, social marketing, emotions, communication skills

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Introduction

This paper addresses gaps in the literature by highlighting the importance of understanding residents' emotional reactions to perceived changes in their community and to local government policies. It also demonstrates the critical role of front-line staff in shaping perceptions and relationships in the community. Specifically, it discusses the evaluation of a training programme which was developed to enable front-line staff deal more effectively with residents. This in turn leads to better community cohesion. Community cohesion has become a national and local priority (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009). LBBD's vision is "To work together for a better borough that is safe, clean, fair and respectful, prosperous and healthy, and where our young people are inspired and successful" (LBBD, 2009a). Underpinning this is the need to build a cohesive community where the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated; co-operation between different communities is encouraged; and good relations and mutual understanding exist. The borough is keen to ensure that all stakeholders play a meaningful role in developing a new community cohesion strategy. However, it is recognised that this it is very difficult to achieve this aim (McGhee, 2003) and therefore LBBD appointed The Campaign Company (TCC) to lead the community engagement work underpinning the development of the strategy. TCC follow a social marketing approach and model developed by Fowlie and Wood (2008) and the National Social Marketing Centre's "benchmark criteria" (NSMC, 2009).

Of primary importance was ensuring members of the wider community had the opportunity to contribute (Cuthill and Fien, 2005) and this involved an exhaustive gathering of insight (Wood, 2008; Lefebvre and Flora, 1988; NSMC, 2009) to provide an in-depth understanding of the issues that concern residents of LBBD and how they perceive the council. The insight work enabled the project team to understand residents' values, motivations and emotions. Some residents do not trust what the council is saying and believe their opinions and feelings are not being responded to. This has contributed to the dissemination of various negative myths amongst parts of the community, propagating negative, pessimistic and destructive opinions (LBBD, 2009b). Traditional approaches to "myth busting" are often flawed because they take a literal and factual approach to what is fundamentally an emotional response (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000).

The Intervention Programme

Most social marketing interventions attempt to change the behaviour of consumers, in this case residents. However, it was recognised that to address myths a service development approach was required to change staff behaviour. All 1200 front-line staff were given the opportunity to participate in a training programme. Building on work by Goleman (1998), the programme enables employees to understand residents' perspectives and emotions around key issues and to change the way they communicate and interact with them. It develops the skills required for "deeper conversations" and more effective communication by enabling staff to consider the emotional reality of the individual resident (Lings et al, 2008). The core skills are:

active listening, uncovering the "real" issues as seen by residents and challenging mis-perceptions without confrontation (Cherniss et al 1998). Central to the programme is the adoption of a careful, open-listening and non-defensive approach where front-line staff aim to improve the quality of their relationships with residents (Walker, 1997; Fowlie and Wood, 2008; 2009; Wood and Fowlie, 2009). The programme follows the principles outlined by Cherniss et al (1998) which suggest that to develop emotional competencies training should include assessment, modelling, rehearsal, practice and reflection and follow three distinct stages. Its effectiveness will be reviewed in the light of evaluation work currently being conducted by the authors.

Method

There were 972 participants at the Effective Conversations training sessions. Attempts were made to contact the entire population and ultimately 450 telephone interviews using a simple structured questionnaire were completed (TTC, 2010). The questions explored the practical usefulness of the training and whether it helped staff to be more effective in their jobs and to offer a better service to residents. The sample comprised participants from all the departments and functions and was therefore considered representative. Respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in further research. Of the 450 respondents over 50% said that they would be willing to participate in future research to explore the initial evaluation findings more fully. The two largest groups of frontline staff consisted of Customers Services and Adult and Community Services and these were used as a sampling frame to recruit participants for 2 initial focus groups held at The Barking Learning Centre in March 2010. Incentives were not used but line managers were asked for permission to release staff. Further qualitative research will be carried out with other groups and also other London Boroughs where the training programme has been introduced. A total of 9 staff (7 women and 2 males which reflected the departments' demographics) participated in these focus groups. Age was not used as a control but all participants, with one exception, had worked for LBBD for at least 5 years. The survey data was loaded into a spreadsheet to generate descriptive statistics and charts. The focus group findings were captured through a combination of flipcharts and audio recordings. These were analysed to identify key themes and quotes. As the sample was small and this was exploratory research the use of analytical software was thought inappropriate. Clearly, this is a small sample and the findings should be treated with caution. However, the key objective was to identify potential improvements and changes to the programme, which can then be re-evaluated when used in other boroughs.

Results

(i) Telephone Survey

- More than 80% of participants found the training useful or very useful.

- 90% believe it will help LBBD provide a better service

- The majority of participants use the three techniques that are presented in the training sessions; Active Listening is the most popular technique with 67% reporting they use it "all the time", and 17% "sometimes". Challenging

without Confrontation is always used by 55% of the respondents compared with 40% who claim they always use Uncovering the Real Issues.

- Participants were asked if the training had made their job easier where 5 = "much easier" and 1 "not at all easier" - the mean score was 3.5.

- 83% of managers who attended (n=86) were supportive of the training programmes' objectives and encouraged their staff to use the techniques.

(ii) Focus Group Findings

General Recollections
The groups were asked (unprompted) about their recollections of the training and which aspects were most memorable. Although at first some people said they could not remember much about the training they were, in fact, able to recall some specific aspects of the programme. The main responses were "relaying back", "reinforcement" and "not responding right away". Quotes from participants included:
> *"Effective communication is about listening," "It is about summarising what someone has said so they know they have been heard."*

The importance of "letting people talk and not jumping in" was stressed.
> *"It made me realise that I need to think before I open my gob[sic], I try and do this more." "Putting a lid on my own opinions until you have listened."*

These are techniques associated with active listening skills. The discussion moved on to deal specifically with the three core communication skills covered in the training:

Most Useful Skills
The participants were asked to rank the usefulness of the three core skills, where 10 is extremely useful and 1 is not at all useful (although a small sample this is a useful technique to gauge strength of feeling within a focus group). They were given specific prompts for each of these skills with the following results:

Active Listening: the majority of respondents rated this aspect of the training 6 or 7/10, with one scoring it 8/10. The overall feeling of the group was this was a very useful element of the course.

Uncovering Underlying Issues: This was scored at about 6/10, with some respondents saying it was a "useful reminder" and "reinforcement" of things they were already doing. Others, however, felt that it was not relevant to them and their work:
> *"We do not deal with underlying issues at the library"*

Avoiding Arguments: This was rated 7/10 and one individual said this was the most memorable part of the programme.
> *"You do have to listen but park it [the resident's unreasonable anger] really".*

How Training has Helped with Job
The groups were asked to give specific examples of how the skills developed in the training programme have helped them in dealing with customers/residents. Most respondents said that active listening was used regularly:

> *"We are getting a number of calls about changes to day care provision… effective listening kicks in straight away and we have to get it on to our data base and we are looking to repeat key words…we do have to do this on a daily basis."*

One participant works in a library and gave an example of dealing with a difficult customer who had incurred fines:

> *"I had a 20-minute conversation with a customer about his large fines…..he started off angrily and ended up calm……he felt actually listened to."*

One individual who deals with antisocial behaviour explained how active listening skills have helped him offer good service and customer satisfaction. From an organisational perspective it also improves efficiency because issues can be dealt with at the time and are less likely to resurface later:

> *"Ensuring that I have listened and repeated back their concerns it makes residents less likely to complain to a local councillor."*

Myth Busting

One individual commented on the myth that the change in provision of services is due to money being used to fund asylum seekers coming into the borough. For the first time B&D residents are saying that they are going to vote BNP:

> *"Residents feel that their needs are being sidelined."*

There was a general consensus among the group that they did not have enough information to deal effectively with myths, for example issues around whether graffiti is getting worse or actually reducing, or how housing is impacted by asylum seekers:

> *"You should not have to make things up."*
> *"It is a very difficult time at the moment because of the re-structuring and more speculations…because of the lack of communication."*

One participant talks to her team regularly about how to manage with residents who question the provision of services, and who say that funds are being diverted to overseas people:

> *"If you have any questions talk to your ward member."*

Communications with Team/Managers

Several respondents commented that the skills they had acquired/developed had been very helpful in dealing with colleagues. In particular they were more likely to listen properly and take their time before responding. In this way potentially conflictual situations were diffused:

> *"You need to just listen and read the notes back."*

Aspects of Training which were not helpful

The groups felt that all the training was relevant but it was down to the individual and their particular situation. However, earlier responses indicate that the *uncovering underlying issues was* found less useful than the other core skills covered in the development programme. Respondents also talked about the importance of training higher managers:

> *"It must start at the top."*

One issue that arose during this part of the discussion was the difficulties in dealing with angry people (either face-to-face or over the phone) and how to end the conversation:

> *"Staff need to be supported to deal with those difficult situations…it can be very intimidating for staff."*

They would like "permission" to end the conversation and, for example, ask the resident to call back.

Examples of Problems in Communicating with Customers

A minority or participants mentioned the difficulties in dealing with a particular type of resident who will not listen (even when employing the relevant communication skills), especially in dangerous situations. However, in one instance where an area had to be cordoned off to allow the staff to remove graffiti, the presence of community support officers was helpful:

> *"I did not ask them but by them sitting there it helped."*

This employee would like to see more effective central communication for these types of situation and this reinforces the need for co-ordinated and consistent messages. It also demonstrates how control and enforcement can make social marketing approaches more effective.

Gaps in Skills/Knowledge

A key issue is how to end or postpone a conversation without conflict or making the situation worse. Linked to this is the need for training in techniques for handling very angry or aggressive residents:

> *"How to deal with someone when you can not solve their problem."*

Some people would like bespoke, tailored training programmes for particular sectors or departments, however realising that this may be difficult.

Further Training

There was a general feeling about the lack of time and also the need for better communications and actions and accountability:

> *"Something has to happen."*

There was some support for a forum for sharing ideas/understanding but little enthusiasm for on-line technologies:

> *"Today has been very useful to meet other people for other departments."*

Conclusions and Proposed Changes

A social marketing approach can be used to increase community engagement and change perceptions - particularly negative myths - of local authorities amongst residents, applying the theoretical framework developed by Fowlie and Wood (2008). The staff development programme was an intervention designed to enable front-line staff to communicate effectively, and have "deeper conversations", with residents. It was developed on the basis of deep insight work with staff and residents. The evaluation research suggests that this training should enable staff to build effective relationships with residents to support perceptual and behavioural change. Respondents were able to give specific examples of how the skills training had enabled them to communicate more effectively with residents and colleagues. The general aim of this paper and the underlying evaluation research was to demonstrate that a social marketing approach to community cohesion which focussed on service and staff development can be effective. Social marketing theory and practice should be developed to include the critical role of service staff when attempting to change the behaviours and perceptions of target audiences. More research is required to explore

the role of emotions and relationships when designing and delivering services and social marketing interventions. More specifically, this research has identified specific aspects of this particular training programme that were found to be useful and also gaps where respondents would like additional support. As a response to these findings improvements to the programme have been suggested (Table 1, below). These have now been incorporated in a modified programme which is being delivered in another London borough. The new programme will be evaluated in due course and this in turn should help in the development of further staff training initiatives. The longer-term impact on residents' perceptions and community cohesion will also be investigated. So, whilst it is recognised that this stage of the project was limited in scope, and the sample for the qualitative research was very small, it should be seen as part of an on-going process of further testing and refinement leading to more effective staff training programmes and enhanced community cohesion in urban Britain.

Table 1: Summary of Proposed Changes

Feedback	Changes to the Workshop
Active listening useful	Active listening should remain a key part of the workshops; further developed to include how to question taking the key content from uncovering the real issue.
Uncovering the real issue not as useful	Key elements of questions to be incorporated within Active Listening, therefore removing it as a separate module
Challenging without confrontation useful	Retained, with slight changes to keep content more specific to the distortions in communications.
Need to address difficult situations where you cannot solve someone's problem or give them what they want.	New Module developed: delivering bad news. Specifically preparing for these types of interactions and realising that someone is likely to be angry and how to deal with this.
To support keeping the training relevant to all participants	Workbook redesigned to make it interactive so participants can make specific notes as to what type of difficult conversations they experience. With more information included in an additional information section.
Understanding your own communication style did not feature in the feedback	The questionnaire was removed, however the underpinning skills needed for communication retained
To improve specially linking techniques to myth busting	Exercise added "bringing it all together facilitated by workshop leader to determine how techniques could challenge resident's views.
To support participants ability to use the techniques	Action planning section incorporated after the main techniques covered, facilitated by workshop leader to help each participant determine three things they are going to action as a result of attending the workshop.

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