

# 1: Conflict resolution & non-violence workshops with young people

**Graeme Stuart** outlines components of a model of successful practice for running a conflict resolution and non-violence workshop based on experience of over thirty workshops run with young people. The model is not complete and will continue to change and grow as experimentation continues. Readers are encouraged to use the model as a starting point for their own exploration rather than as a finishing point to strive for.

SINCE 1994, the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and Help Increase the Peace (HIP) have conducted workshops in Newcastle on conflict resolution and non-violence with adults and young people. As we reflected on the successes and failures of the workshops, we developed a model which identified the features of effective workshops with young people in schools or youth services. This model was developed with the support of the Samaritans and 12-month funding from the Crime Prevention Division of the NSW Attorney General's Department.

The paper discusses the model in terms of project experience and the translation of the model into practice.

## The model

### Workshop structure

While there is some variation in the length and structure of workshops, the essential elements remain the same and include:

- beginning with group-building exercises and the establishment of

- group agreements;
- a variety of structured experiential, interactive activities and small-group discussion;
- energisers to encourage cooperation, let off steam, change the pace of the session and have fun; and
- feedback from the participants.

Generally, workshops are 10 hours or longer (although some have been one day or shorter) and have between six and 15 participants.

### Clear philosophy

A clear philosophy underpins all aspects of the workshops and projects. The philosophy includes beliefs that:

- all people are of value and worthy of respect;
- there is "good" in all people and that if we respond to the positive in people we are likely to find it;
- we learn best by being directly involved in the experience;
- as facilitators our role is to offer choices, not tell others how to live; and

- in workshops, the participants bring a wealth of experience, insights and skills which can contribute to the group's (including the facilitator's) learning.

Project facilitators attempt to ensure that this philosophy shapes the way they:

- deal with difficult behaviour;
- involve teachers in workshops;
- relate to participants;
- support each other as facilitators; and
- respect the experience and knowledge of participants and facilitators.

When facing challenging behaviour, facilitators generally try to give young people three choices:

- to be involved in the workshop and follow the group agreements;
- to take time out from the workshop without disturbing the other participants; or
- to withdraw from the workshop.

By offering these choices, facilitators hope to show respect for young people and their knowledge of their own needs or wants, and encourage them to make decisions for themselves. Treating young people in a respectful way gives them the opportunity to respond in a similar way.

A number of beliefs about conflict resolution also underpin the project work:

- Conflict is a natural part of life.
- When approaching interpersonal conflict, a cooperative approach is more effective than a competitive approach.
- In order to work cooperatively, it is necessary to have respect for self and other.
- Conflict is more likely to be resolved if the focus is primarily on interests or needs rather than on solutions or positions.
- Communication plays an important role in conflict resolution.
- Self-awareness is necessary in order to be able to respond constructively to conflict.
- Conflict is not always easily resolved nor does everyone approach conflict cooperatively.
- Despite problems or provocation, it is helpful to maintain a cooperative approach, to be open to

possibilities and to seek a fair or just solution.

## The project

### Experiential learning

Experiential learning is used in workshops, and in the development of workshops. It is based on cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. In practice, this means that planning, action and reflection are recognised as important and sufficient time is devoted to them.

For each workshop, facilitators try (not always successfully) to allow time to:

- hold a pre-workshop planning meeting to:
  - identify objectives for the workshop;
  - plan the agenda; and
  - identify individual “learning edges” (areas in which to improve facilitation style);
- gain regular feedback from the participants;
- at the end of each day, check that the agenda is still relevant, make any changes and discuss any critical incidents;
- meet a day or two after the workshop to evaluate it and consider the objectives, identify what worked, what could have

been improved and any ideas for future workshops;

- consider personal strengths and challenges and provide feedback to each other; and
- seek feedback from the organisation after the completion of the workshop.

Facilitators are always looking for ways to improve both individual work and the workshops as a whole. However, sometimes pressures (such as the lack of time or other deadlines) may curtail this process to the detriment of the project.

### Experienced facilitators

Facilitators need extensive experience and expertise in conflict resolution, non-violence and working with young people. Less experienced facilitators, including young people, can contribute a great deal but they need to be supported by people with greater experience and expertise. Train the Trainer workshops may not provide adequate training unless facilitators have previous training and expertise.

### Strong support structures

The workshops have benefited from a strong, supportive structure provided by AVP and the Samaritans which

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ACYS library photo

includes professional supervision and support. The project attempts to ensure that facilitation teams are supportive and allow time for peer debriefing. Workshops are often stressful, hard work and even distressing, so it is important that facilitators are supported and encouraged to care for each other.

*One day in a workshop, there was a punch-up, a student "trashed" the room by throwing things around the room and up-ending a cupboard, we had to intervene twice when a student was threatening other students and there was a punch-up during lunch time.*

*It helped to discuss the events and to recognise aspects of the day's events over which we had no control.*

## The process

### Relevant, experiential content

Workshops need to be relevant but we also believe that workshops which are based on experiential learning are effective and can be shaped to cover issues of interest to, or needed by, the participants.

Careful preparation is important in order to ensure the workshops are as relevant as possible. When conducting a workshop within another organisation, we attempt to spend time learning about the context in which we will be working by speaking to key people, meeting some of the young people and observing the way the organisation operates.

When conducting a workshop for staff of a juvenile justice centre, we met with a number of senior staff to discuss the aims of the workshops, and with the staff development manager to discuss the content of the workshop. Most importantly, we spent two days in the centre (one in the school and one in the yard) so that we could meet some of the staff and gain some insight into the context in which they work. In the workshops, we had more credi-

bility with the staff because we had made an effort to understand their work conditions and some of the problems they faced.

### Facilitation teams

Workshops, whenever possible, are run with at least two facilitators with a mix of ages and gender. This strategy provides opportunities:

- to model gender relationships on equality and respect;
- to break into small groups and have a facilitator in each group;
- to have a mixture of facilitation styles; and
- for a facilitator to spend time with an upset or disruptive individual while the group continues.

### Small groups

Most of our workshops are small, closed groups. Generally we try to keep workshops to no more than 15 (or occasionally 20) participants. In workshops for young people with high needs, we try to work with only six to eight young people.

While small groups are more labour intensive, we found that they are more effective when working with young people who have experienced problems with conflict and violence.

### Flexibility

Flexibility in workshop structure and content is necessary in order to meet the varying and diverse needs of each group. At the same time, being flexible can mean accepting conditions which are not really suitable. Consequently, the aim is for a balance between flexibility and minimum standards.

*In one workshop we allowed the teachers to come and go because they had commitments with their HSC classes. While they needed to spend time with these classes, their coming and going interrupted the group dynamics and undermined our emphasis on the importance of participants attending all sessions.*

### Follow-up

During the project we experimented with a variety of workshop lengths. The structure which seemed to work best was 10 to 15 hours spread over two to three days followed by regular follow-up sessions. This allows some intensive exploration of issues and then some longer-term reinforcement of the insights gained.

Our experience and feedback from the schools and other people involved suggests that the workshops have a greater impact on the participants when there is more follow-up, especially on a regular basis.

### "Walk the talk"

Facilitators and staff involved in the workshops need to "walk the talk" – they need to be demonstrating the skills and attitudes suggested by the workshop. If the facilitators are discussing collaborative approaches to dealing with conflict but are demonstrating controlling and disrespectful behaviour in conflict with the participants, it is understandable if the participants don't start using a collaborative approach.

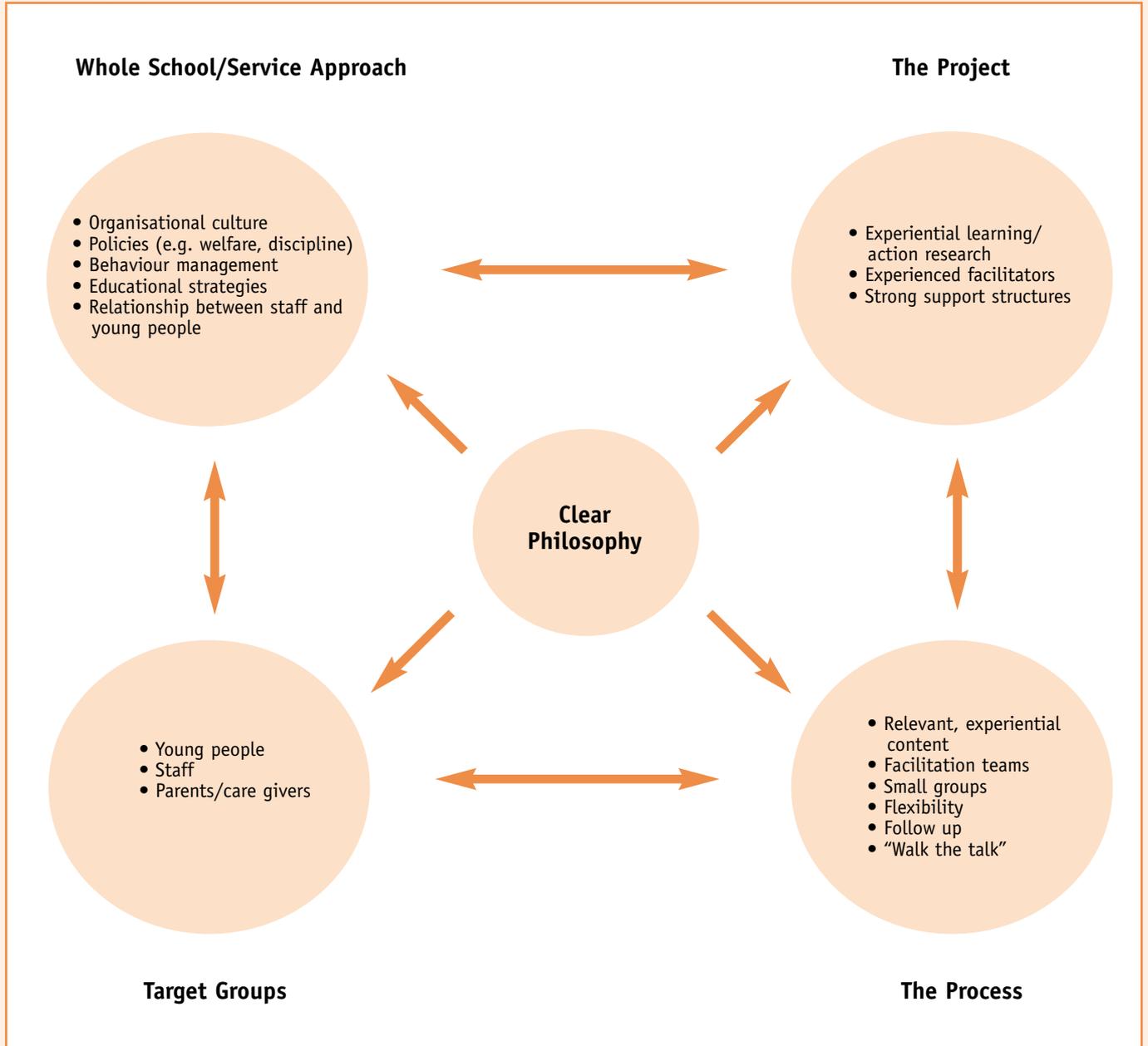
For the workshops to have the maximum effect, then not only the staff directly involved in the workshop but the whole organisation should be "walking the talk" and be continually modelling behaviour which contributes to conflict resolution and non-violence.

### The target group

It is very important to consider the context of young people's lives. If facilitators are assisting them to explore certain behaviour and this behaviour is being undermined in other areas of their lives, the effectiveness of the workshops will be decreased.

During the 12-month funded period, we often targeted young people in organisations. We believe it would have been more effective to have worked more with parents (or caregivers) and staff.

## The Model



Early on in the projects it was decided to include teachers in school workshops whenever possible. While there are some problems with this policy, overall, the result is positive. Some of the drawbacks included:

- the danger that teacher behaviour management strategies are not

really consistent with the philosophy of the workshops. In particular, our approach is to encourage students to make decisions about their behaviour, and occasionally we feel teachers want to make decisions for the students. Our impression is that

occasionally a couple of teachers treated students with less respect than they might have;

- the dislike of the teachers' presence by some students;
- the difficulties teachers face if students discuss their perceptions of how other teachers treat them;

- and
- if teachers come and go, the undermining of the importance of participants being present for the whole workshop.

The disadvantages outlined above are, however, outweighed by the advantages. The teachers:

- gain an insight into issues facing the students;
- are seen in a different role by the students;
- are able to provide follow-up support to students;
- can tell other teachers about the project;
- are able to bring another perspective to the workshop; and
- have background knowledge of the students and the school which can be helpful.

*Teachers involved in one of the schools commented that they had a new relationship with the students, even those not in their classes. They saw them around the school grounds and were able to say hello and take a special interest in them.*

*They suggested that if the students were in trouble they could be sent to see them first rather than being sent directly to the deputy principal. They could then help to reinforce some of the ideas from the workshop.*

### Whole school/service approach

Our experience suggests that the context in which the workshop occurs is vital and that this is an area we need to explore further.

On reflection, more time needs to be spent on creating the context in which the workshops occur. Key people (e.g. teachers, support staff) need to be provided with a better understanding of our philosophy so that staff of the organisation do not undermine the workshop themes.

More effort also needs to be put into educating as many of the staff of

the school or organisation as possible about the workshop content and process. The people who will have ongoing interactions with the young people can then reinforce the key messages of the workshop. This would also help ensure that staff do not have unrealistic expectations of the workshop outcomes.

*In a community-based workshop, two young people came from an accommodation unit. Following the workshop, some staff at the accommodation unit expected to see a major change in the young people's behaviour and said that the workshop must have been a waste of time as they could not really see much difference.*

If staff have unrealistically high expectations of change in young people following a workshop, the experience of the workshop can actually be undermined.

We need to spend more time working with schools in particular so that the workshops are introduced to young people in ways which create a positive start to the process.

*At one school, a letter given to the students to take home to their parents seeking their permission to take part in a workshop said, among other things: "we are going to focus on students who have been involved in harassment – name calling, teasing, rumour-spreading, etc. Again we will be nominating a very small group of students who have either been victims or who have recently been involved in the harassment of other students".*

*"If you would like [your child] to be one of the eight students, please complete the tear-off slip below."*

*Our concern was that the students could gain the impression that they were one of the eight worst students in the school or at least were pretty bad. If we had worked more closely with the school we could have*

*helped them to develop a more positive letter.*

We often feel that our workshops are such a small influence on young people compared to all the other things happening around them. Workshops might be more effective if more time is spent working with staff.

More work needs to be done on ways of developing non-violent cultures in schools and youth services to reinforce positive conflict resolution and non-violence. Not only do there need to be appropriate policies, behaviour management and educational strategies in place but more intangible factors, such as relationships between staff and young people, are important.

While we believe there is some benefit in conducting one-off workshops with young people, the real challenge is in developing cultures within organisations (and society in general) which are based on principles of non-violence and conflict resolution.

### Acknowledgments

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