

Group Relations Australia

Leadership and Authority in Contemporary Public Service Organisations. A reading, discussion and application group.

Facilitators: John Newton & Fred Wright. Report date: **19/3/20**

4 sessions, 6- 9pm, 25/2, 3/3, 10/3 & 17/3/20, VAPP rooms, Erin St., Richmond

The program attracted 9 participants (3 men and 6 women) 7 of whom held public sector work roles, and 3 of whom were members of GRA.

Pre-reading selected by John was provided prior to the first 2 sessions and for the following sessions John tried to choose readings that responded to the needs of participants. The group engaged very well with each other and were open to voicing what they did and did not understand. John elaborated on relevant conceptual points with spontaneous lecturettes. The initial difficulty in discerning the ways in which management and leadership may differ between the private and public sectors soon found a focus in the unfolding public dynamics concerning the Covid19 pandemic. This became a living case study in which no participant could claim superior knowledge/experience so all were able to offer opinions, comparisons and analysis from their own observations of and responses to the pandemic. And, it provided a keen example of what sort of anxieties the public sector needs to contain and the complexity for which it needs to provide leadership 'without easy answers'.

As a relatively brief program, the aim was to educate through reading relevant papers and making links to participant's own work settings rather than any consultation or experiential/depth approaches. The culture of the group fairly quickly became one of trying to understand/deepen understanding of systems psychodynamic concepts and listening to the sense made by others. This helped 'newcomers' approach difficult concepts with interest rather than bewilderment and gave 'old hands' the opportunity to demonstrate their grasp of the ideas within a supportive milieu. There was minimal time for specific application to participants' work issues.

Reflections

John felt that the emphasis became more like 'an introduction to systems psychodynamics' for the newcomers who found the public sector related papers difficult to grasp. If the program were to run again with the current title it may need more consideration of just how to work with the public sector focus and how much time is needed for individual application. The unplanned for, yet inadvertently relevant, Covid19 pandemic shifted us into a more public sector orientation on this occasion.

Fred felt that the large proportion of participants without a background in systems psychodynamic thinking was significant in that it set the tone of the sessions and highlighted a need to ensure accessibility of reading options. It also meant that John spent time providing some theory, which guided the direction of discussion. The background of the virus also meant that the group had an experience of containment, including the value of dialogue and reflection at a time of increasing anxiety.