Partners and Opponents: Managing social justice and economic values in the value plural operating context of nonprofit social services

Jenny GREEN

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney /NSW, Australia

Social justice organisational values are central to nonprofit social services (Lyons, 2001, p. 22). Espoused and enacted, instrumental and terminal, socially responsible values are these organisations’ core business. Their values distinguish the nonprofit sector from for-profit businesses and government (Jeavons, 1992); they are one of the central reasons why people choose to work and volunteer in nonprofit organisations (Onyx, 1998) and they are the reason donors give, benefactors leave bequests and philanthropic foundations fund them (Bryce, 1992, p 82; Fremont-Smith, 1965; Oster, 1995, pp. 139–43). The nonprofit values motive can be likened to the profit motive of for-profit businesses. Just as for-profit businesses cannot afford to take their eye off their profits lest their business suffers, neither can nonprofits afford to take their eye off their values lest the organisation and its services suffer.

The alignment between espoused and enacted values has a considerable impact on an organisation. Studies on values alignment have found the benefits to be immense. Aligned values contribute to employee commitment and identification with the organisation, job satisfaction, retention and employee cohesion to name a few (Sullivan, Sullivan & Buffton, 2002; Dearlove & Coomber, 1999; LeMon, 2000; Kouzes, 2003). Whilst, it has been found that in organisations where the espoused and enacted organisational values were different, employees interpreted the espoused value statements as empty. This undermined the credibility of management and overall the employees became cynical and dispirited (Lenocioni, 2002).

In recent times, neo-liberal government funding approaches in Australian have changed the operating context of nonprofit social services (Painter, 1997). These changes have included a greater emphasis on competitive tendering, outputs-based contracts and enforcement of more stringent accountability and compliance regimes (Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000; Staples, 2006). They have applied economic pressures not previously experienced. These pressures have resulted in changes in organisations, service delivery and attitudes. Many nonprofit social services find themselves in a situation where their social justice values reflect the philosophy and values of social democracy and distributive justice but their operations reflect the requirements and principles of neo-liberalism.

This paper reports on a qualitative research study of twenty two interviews in which the Chairpersons and CEOs of eleven Australian nonprofit social services were interviewed in depth. The interviews explored the effects of neoliberalism on values in organisations. The analysis identified that the organisations were not operating from one set of social justice values. They were operating, all the time, from two sets of values: the espoused social justice organisational values and a set of economic values. However, whilst the economic values were enacted by individuals in the organisations, they were not espoused or owned by the organisations. They were often disguised as imperatives. They were, in effect, the silent partner, highly influential but not clearly identifiable. The organisational operating context was unmistakably value plural. Whilst for the most part the economic and social justice values coexisted in a continuous balancing act, inevitably there were decisions that required one value to take precedence over the other and at that point they became incommensurable. Nonetheless, this was not recognised and there were no procedures in place to manage such a situation.
Value pluralism takes the position that there are multiple and conflicting ideas of good that require complex political and ethical responses. Drawing on the political theories of value pluralism (Berlin, 1997; Grey, 1996, 2000; Crowder, 2004; Mason, 2006), this paper reports on the analysis of the study and identifies missing practices that are essential for effective operations and management in the value plural context that appears to be common to nonprofit social services today.

References


