

Team Psychological Safety and Interprofessional Team Development

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This paper outlines aspects of an action research study examining the development of interprofessional teamwork at two residential care facilities for older people.

An interprofessional team in health and social care is a team made up of professionals from a number of disciplines whose purpose is to work together in an integrated way. Interactions within the team are characterised by mutual respect, the use of inclusive language, shared decision-making, shared power and shared knowledge. Team members have well-defined roles as well as a good understanding of the roles of other team members (Barrett and Keeping, 2005; Sheehan et al, 2007; Hammick et al, 2009).

Simply putting individuals together and expecting them to develop the characteristics of interprofessional teamwork is unrealistic (Hewstone and Brown, 1986), especially since professional identification can cause divisions in professional diverse groups (Illes and Auluck, 2004). For interprofessional characteristics to emerge, team members must learn about each other's roles in order to ascertain where the boundaries between professions lie, and must learn to trust each other in order to share knowledge to allow them to work co-operatively across these boundaries (Barrett and Keeping, 2005; Mach et al, 2010). A team environment must be fostered to facilitate a team development process during which this learning can occur.

I chose action research as it fosters learning and co-generation of knowledge because of meaningful involvement of participants in the research process and the creation of space for collective reflection (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2005; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). I brought various professionals together on a multidisciplinary team at two residential care facilities for older people. The teams planned, implemented and evaluated evidence-based changes in pain management at the facilities, and concurrently were encouraged to take a parallel focus on developing interprofessional collaboration.

In one facility, the team developed the characteristics of interprofessional teamwork and achieved improvements in care facility-wide. In the second facility, there was only a limited shift towards interprofessional teamwork and enhanced care.

In my analysis of the findings, I drew from the work of Schein and Bennis (1965) and Edmondson (1999). Schein and Bennis (1965) in their work on organisational change use the term psychological safety to describe the degree to which individuals regard their work environment as open to risk taking. Edmondson (1999) develops the concept further and characterises team psychological safety as *a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves* (1999, p354). Within this environment individuals are comfortable asking questions, seeking feedback, highlighting failures and sharing information.

The findings of the study revealed that development of team psychological safety within the teams at the facilities was an important catalyst in the development of understanding and power sharing across professional boundaries, thus, in the development of interprofessional teamwork. At one facility, initial team psychological safety was moderate and grew throughout the team development process. By the end of the study, the team exhibited the characteristics of an interprofessional team. At the second facility, initial levels of team psychological safety were low and though they eventually grew, this growth occurred late in team development. By the end of the study, the team only displayed limited interprofessional team characteristics. Driving and restraining forces internal and external to the team accounted for the differences with stability in team membership and organisational culture emerging as particularly important.

The results of this study highlight the importance of developing team psychological safety within teams expected to behave as interprofessional teams as well as the importance of paying attention to the forces that impact on its development.

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