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ESSAY ON THE YMCA AND THE MSC..... STORY OF A RELATIONSHIP

Organisations as well as species are in the struggle to survive. As with climate, geographical changes and major upheavals groups of animals survive or do not; so with organisations or associations. As a consequence those that have survived for a long time as organisations have proved their ability to adapt to change and to take advantage of these changes in Society around them. The converse is that if they become complacent in their ability to change then they die through apathy.

In the commercial world we see the same phenomena. In this world the competition is more cut throat. It is truly survival of the fittest. Companies are predatory, and try to eliminate or out compete their rivals. Financial gain is obviously the prime motive but there are often competitive forces emanating from Managers and Company Directors to be the biggest; the best; the most successful. There are unscrupulous tactics, such as buying more and more of a suppliers goods, and when you are the sole or major customer, reducing the price knowing that the supplier is now dependant on your custom.

This then is the climate into which the National Council of YMCAs of Wales Incorporated enters in 1979. This Company limited by guarantee and also a registered Charity was about to embark on a relationship with the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). Also known cynically as the Ministry of Social Control.

In so-doing the YMCA was building on years of experience. The YMCA was founded in 1844 to meet a specific need at a specific time of social upheaval. The economy of the British Empire was at its height. Labour was needed in Industry, and many immigrants were drawn in to the mills and heavy engineering industries. Likewise there was a shortage of basically educated young people to enter the world of trading and commerce. It was in this world that George Williams a farmer's son from Somerset came to London to be apprenticed to a Draper. This is the polite version as the particular firm made ladies under garments-corsets.

The working conditions were harsh by our standards. The working day was 13 hours. Apprentice accommodation was on the premises, and the working week was 6 days. Sunday was the day off and the apprentice was expected to attend the place of worship as prescribed by the firms' owner. The social consequences of this regime were a high rate of drunkenness; a certain amount of debauchery; and little time for education and self enhancement. Into this came into being the YMCA Young Mens' organisation, they were young; they were Christian, and of course they formed an Association. Since this time the YMCA has become one of the best known International Brands, especially after the Village People!

Within 10 years this was an International Organisation, with the ability to adapt to the circumstances pertaining in the area where the local YMCA was to be established. It is this inherent ability to alter chameleon-like that has seen the YMCA survive in the Charity Market Place for 158 years.

This preamble is to set the scene for the YMCA in Wales to court, and arrange a relationship with the MSC. Firstly let us review the history of the YMCA in Wales. Up until 1981, Wales formed part of the National Council of YMCAs of England, Ireland and Wales. However there was a high degree of devolution, there was a National Board of YMCAs of Wales although it was ultimately responsible to the parent body in England. The Welsh YMCA had already proved itself to be innovative and responsive to be able to adapt to the particular and peculiar needs of Wales. Hostels had been created in the major cities, where young workers could seek safe, reasonably priced accommodation, and where a Christian message could be brought to bear. Other YMCAs developed Bible studies, reading rooms and further education classes. In 1910 the YMCA had gained a licence to broadcast educational materials so that people could learn at home. A

forerunner of distance learning and the Open University. This was based in Westgate Street in Cardiff.

During the depressions and recessions of the Industrial history of the Welsh Valleys the YMCA, responding to the local need, was involved in food distribution, social welfare and job training. Now this would be called Up skilling, or retraining. In essence it is the same. It was on the base of this history, this knowledge base belonging to the YMCA that we entered our relationship with the MSC. The MSC had the brief to train young people in skills old and new and to equip them for work once there was an upturn in the economy. Coupled with this avowed aim was the need to keep young people occupied at a time of an average of 40% unemployment. In some places in the Valleys it was higher than this. There was a great fear of rioting by idle young people. There was a great fear that we were creating a generation that would be always dependent on the State. The Government needed to do something. That something was the Manpower Services Commission.

Pioneering work in the field of further education had led to the founding of Coleg y Fro in Rhoose. This college had the remit to train those who wanted a career other than that in mining or steel making and to be able to obtain in, a residential setting, the basic O levels and sometimes A levels necessary to go on to professional training. The current Chairman of the National Council in Wales, the Reverend Edward Evans, was trained at Coleg y Fro in order to enter the Priesthood. As well as working on these residential courses the college also ran a series of weeklong training courses for apprentices and operatives. These were variously titled "Citizenship Courses; Leadership Courses, Team Building Courses".

In 1963 the YMCA England introduced a new scheme called Youth in Industry. This scheme was designed to take the opportunity for young apprentices, and operatives to have regular weekly classes on life skills whilst in the work place. This scheme was a derivative from a post war venture called British Boys for British Farms. This had been a collaborative venture between the YMCA and the Ministry of Agriculture to increase the labour force for British Farms, but also to provide recruits for farm workers in Canada and Australia.

This then is the background to the 1978/1979 relationship between the YMCA in Wales and the MSC. The point to be made is that the YMCA as an organisation was well positioned, experienced and equipped to enter into such a contractual relationship.

THE MSC CONTRACT

I had been in Wales working as the Youth In industry Tutor for 3 years 1973-1976. This job was self financing and was solely up to the individual in post to: - recruit, market the scheme, set fees, sign contracts, develop materials and to deliver the courses. This was a wonderful experience that could be transferred to the MSC contract.

The Government announced the scheme. At once the YMCA Board of Management decided that this was a scheme for which they wished to tender. They reasoned that this was an opportunity that fell well within the remit of the YMCA. This remit is contained in the Mission Statement, which states that "The YMCA seeks to provide for the Spiritual, Social Educational and Physical Wellbeing of Young People". In addition the previous history of the YMCA in Wales gave it a head start in the race that ensued to get on the "bandwagon", or not to put too fine a point on it the "gravy train". For in the contract there was a contractual agreement to pay a per capita fee and also agreed establishment costs. Although not over generous the sums on offer were large especially in relation to the grant aid for local YMCAs that had resulted from the Albermarle Report in the early sixties. The strategy that was embarked upon was in two parts.

The first was that the National Council would enable any local YMCA to submit a bid to develop its own MSC Training Scheme. These were partnerships between the autonomous local YMCAs and the National Council in Wales. As a note of explanation, although the term National Council implies a hierarchical status as being the premier YMCA body in Wales, in fact the National Council is owned and operated by its affiliated members who are the local autonomous YMCAs in Wales.

Two major schemes were established. The first was a partnership between Hirwaun, Aberaman, Mountain Ash YMCAs and the National Council of YMCAs of Wales.

This project concentrated on teaching skills in the building trade. Bricklaying, Plastering, Decorating and Carpentry were the subjects. In addition there was an office based training and development programme concentrating on the then new Computer Skills. This project like all of them involved the advertising, recruitment, and training of staff. It involved large payroll management, and all the ancillary employment law responsibilities that in inherent in employing people.

The second major scheme was at Bargoed YMCA. This project included training in Carpentry, Video and Film making and in Computer Skills. These were innovative subjects for instruction and were noteworthy in the advanced skills that they taught.

In all these schemes there was a contract with the MSC in Wales and day to day contact by the various MSC officials. These Officials were to monitor, Health and Safety, Equal Opportunities, the integration of young people with physical disabilities and learning difficulties. There were extra allowances for taking these people into training. All the time the YMCAs knew that they were entering new territory. The normal youth and community facility that YMCAs had traditionally operated were kept separate from the new ways of working with young people in the communities. These traditional Youth Clubs benefited from enhanced premises available because of the extra resources offered by the MSC funding, and from the Works Practice that many of the schemes did using the YMCA premises as the buildings on which to practice.

But these were not the main benefits to come out of these contractual experiences. We were developing a generation of Youth and Community Workers who were entrepreneurial. A generation that was happy to work to Performance Indicators. To work to Performance Appraisal systems. To have to work to measured outcomes. This some 8 years before the rest of the Youth Service became subject to these sorts of measurements.

The National Council capitalised on two things. Firstly the collective experience the organisation had accumulated and secondly the expertise present in its staff member, which had been gained through YMCA experience and training. This utilisation of the experience, expertise and dynamic of the Youth Leader was vital to the development of our relationship with the MSC. Of the 25 YMCA affiliated associations at that time only 8 took part in the MSC opportunity. This factor of the knowledge base, the experience of the worker and their willingness to develop the youth service and themselves was a controlling factor. In the current opportunistic Youth Service the same restricting factors appear to be controlling expansion and diversity. How this inability for some workers to adapt to change can be overcome is a problem which in 42 years in Youth Service Management I have not solved. The only strategy that seems to work in the long run is to quietly efficiently and legally ease them out of post. For it is the worker who can adapt to both new ways of delivery and methods of accountability who will progress the Service. My fear is that just as in the days of MSC contracts many project workers will not be able to cope with the demands set by the funder. The current enhancement of the Youth Service to deliver on the Wales Assembly Government and the Westminster Governments agendas will not meet targets and expectations. For example if money is to be poured into a crime reduction programme operated under contract from Government, and that this funding has as its measurable outcomes a set reduction in Crime Figures; then if after the given time there is no reduction then the funding will be withdrawn. This is the hard lesson of the contract economy. You take the money on the terms conditions of the contract and you stand and fall by your performance against the targets set.

The National Council embarked on several training programmes to enhance its property. Schemes at Glan y Môr, Barry, Glan Morfa in Rhyl, and Coleg y Fro gave work experience whilst at the same time renovating and adapting the buildings on which the experience was being gained. At Glan y Môr a landscaping scheme modified the seaward side of the grounds. Fences were replaced. Sea buckthorn planted. All the rooms were painted.

In Rhyl the entire property was refitted with new windows, after which the building was repainted inside and out. The majority of the cost was allowed by the MSC to provide the materials on which the young people, trainees could work.

At Coleg y Fro, Rhose a large scheme of renovation was implemented including the replacement of all windows, new room heating systems and redecoration of the entire property.

Port Talbot YMCA in partnership with the National Council established a catering business which at its height employed 12 people and sold 70 meals per day. Alongside this a day nursery was started which used the catering to provide meals for the children.

Barry YMCA built a new Building with MSC labour and a lot of training money. The present building shows the complexity of the schemes which prospered under the MSC. All these schemes had fancy names like Youth Training Scheme, YTS, or STEP which for the life of me I cannot remember the title the acronym stood for.

I am certain that at some time or other neither the MSC Staff or those providing training knew which scheme they were operating and indeed which conditions applied to what. This is one of the dangers of contract work. The need for the perpetuation of contract to keep the staff team intact; or to keep the sponsoring body financially viable or to prove the successfulness of the scheme manager. As with all contracts especially those with the Government the goal posts continuously change. The administration gradually becomes more burdensome. The planning documents begin to pile up. The number of policy statements needed to meet any eventuality mount. It would appear that this phenomenon is inversely proportional to the number of managers employed by the Government agency. At the outset when the Governments priority is to deal with an acute problem they are grateful to anyone who can help. As the bureaucracy of the government department intensifies so the volume of regulations, form filling, enquiries, and inspections increase. This is currently true about the plethora of Objective 1 and 2, ESF, First, Safer Cities, Community Regeneration Funds. The poor unsuspecting applicant does not know what volume, even torrent of red tape to which they will be subjected. This is a very important factor to build into bids. However the YMCA or any other organisation coming from a value base that "wants to help people", is ill-prepared for this onslaught of interference.

In contrast, having now had years of experience of working on non-governmental contracts, those requiring a job to be done specify the task to be completed. They do initial checks on the procedures, operating policies, and insurance they deem necessary, and then they leave the contractor to get on with it. The measurement of success is by the inbuilt performance indicators or the outcome measures. In other words private contractors seem to understand the rules of contract, whereas the Governmental contractors learn as they go along and change the rules of the contract, if not the terms.

In this matter the MSC were the first Governmental Agency issuing contracts to Youth Training Providers, most youth organisations had had dealings with. We moved from the cosy world of being leisure time occupiers of Young People to organisations with something to sell. We had to go through a whole process of identifying what skills we had to offer. This in the case of the YMCA was easier than for some as already we were working with Industry to develop young people who were apprentices to being potential "good employees" or just "good citizens". We were able to readily market the skills that were loosely termed "Life and Social Skills". This generic and shorthand phrase encapsulated the whole emerging skills based that the Youth Service had practised for generations but had never analysed. As an example several people had been intensifying Youth Work practice to move away from the open drop in youth club. This club often consisted of a well tried and tested programme of indoor games, sport, particularly football, table tennis and pool and snooker. The traditional Youth Club programme which is still the practice of many youth facilities today. There is no problem with this at all. If that is what you set out to be, a place where young people can socialise and congregate off the streets then this is your definable outcome and will be monitored as such. However if you purport to be more proactive in effecting young peoples' lives then an interventionist strategy is required. As a consequence Coffee Bar

work had become popular where a more controlled and intimate atmosphere could be created to enable a relationship in confidence and trust to be established between trained youth worker and client. Specialist Youth Work such as Drug Counselling became an acknowledged part of youth service. At the same time the skills involved in group counselling began to be developed. These skills when added to the work going on in coffee bar settings, began to move the youth service and the YMCA into having a marketable product. This product is that of working with young people who are, or perceive themselves to be marginalised, treated unfairly or just no good.

This was the product the MSC wanted to purchase. The market was very large and with product in hand we went forth to supply the market. The YMCA again was able to sell its skills, value base, and expertise. Here was a bonanza.

And so the most profitable period in the YMCA of Wales' history began. Do not read profitable as purely being about money and bank balances. It was a period of rapid growth, and we learnt how to manage this. It was a period of great exploration as to the skills which the YMCA could examine identify and hone. The volume of new forms of group work that were developed was phenomenal. The innovativeness to produce enquiry forms was exciting. The whole essence of the work we were doing was thought about and defined. It crystallised as this. IN A NON THREATENING, NON JUDGMENTAL SETTING A TRAINED TUTOR WILL WORK WITH A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE. THE METHOD WILL BE TO ENQUIRE FROM THE GROUP THE BASE KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION THAT GROUP HAS ON ANY GIVEN TOPIC AND HELP THE GROUP EDUCATE THEMSELVES FROM THAT STARTING POINT. Simple. Yes. Hard to do? Yes. The number of people trained to operate in this way was severely limited. Training techniques had to be devised. Training following recruitment had to be undertaken.

This simple statement of the method of working with disillusioned or marginalised young people has stood the YMCA in good stead. For example, currently we are seeing a boom in Further Education. The YMCA in Wales being a Responsible Body for Further Education has utilised this position, and the accumulated knowledge base of the 158 years of the YMCA's experience to work with those least likely to re-enter education. The results are amazing. Of the 1760 part time students enrolled, 92% finish the course. The comparison is that the worst performing College of Further Education in Wales is only 38% retention.

Using our reputation built up in the days of Youth in Industry and the associated database we mailed all industries in Wales that were likely to join in the YTS Scheme. It was a strategy of the government that by paying existing employers a subsidy to take "on the job training" and thus to increase the likelihood of young trainees in that company once there was an economic upturn, and to occupy unemployed young people. In addition to in house training and work experience given by the company or industry, there was a compulsory Life And Social Skills Element to be provided. This Industry and Commerce were ill equipped to do, but the YMCA had a product for this niche market.

Thus began one of the most intense periods of growth for the YMCA in Wales, and indeed the YMCA in England, for you will remember that it was an English YMCA Programme Youth In Industry which gave the YMCA the experience of working with manufacturers and commerce. The YMCA of England was developing a scheme of training to meet the requirements of the MSC. This was "Training for Life". A comprehensive scheme of specialist training centres throughout England to meet the demands of unemployed young people. We shall return to the "Training For Life" experience in England a little later. Suffice it to note in the saga of the YMCA in Wales and the MSC that there was very close co-operation between the two National Councils. Indeed the Training For Life Programme was franchised to Scotland giving the YMCA in mainland Britain a reputation and a bargaining position second to none.

Back in Wales things were hotting up. Firms were clamouring to sign up the YMCA as their Life and Social Skills provider. This involved the YMCA having personnel who could sell the product. A hectic period of marketing and selling followed. It was time for the Cinderella Youth Service to shout its whereabouts. At last we had something to sell. At last we had something that society wanted,

and that could deliver the outcomes demanded. There were of course those in the Youth Service who decried this commercialisation of a youth service practice. But there are always detractors. The list of firms who were contracted was impressive. They were ICI, Pontypool: Parke Davies, Warner Lambert, Penny and Giles, Alcan Aluminium British Airways Engines Overhaul, Firth Cleveland Fastenings, Marks and Spencer's, Boots, B&Q, The Timber Trades Federation, British Steel. Protective Clothing Blaenau Ffestiniog. All these companies and some other small firms wanted our service. Each firm needed a day a week of training in Life and Social skills. We had to recruit people who we thought capable of being trained to use our methods. The resources of the National Council which had been adequate for the needs of a Youth Work support organisation with a College and two residential training Centres were being strained to the limits as more and more part time tutors were taken on. These had to be paid, resourced and managed. An extra YTS manager had to be recruited. Haydn Jones was this person.

The implications and the demands on the resources of the National Council as the contracting body began to distort the very organisation itself. The emphasis of the National Council to be the provider of support and corporate facilities to the affiliated local YMCAs became changed. It became a support to those who were participating in YTS Schemes and began to neglect the rest. The National Council in some senses became another YMCA. It was acting as a functioning YMCA outlet, and was making a profit in so doing. This was a great relief to the National Council Staff who in most things prior to YTS had had to work through local YMCA Management Committees. The YMCAs operating YTS Schemes were delighted in their enhanced or more favoured status. We became aware of this early on in Wales and were able to make Managerial decisions which began to address the inequality of service that was resulting from MSC success. We simply intensified the staff and training support we gave to the neglected YMCAs. The money from the MSC contract allowed us to employ staff to facilitate the needs of the non MSC YMCAs.

In England the YMCA formed a training division "Training For Life". This was based in Manchester. This separate branch of the YMCA grew at a phenomenal rate. It became bigger in the number of staff employed, money turnover and profitability. The Training for Life team had training centres and offices in towns where there were long established YMCAs. There was a time when in Chester there were two YMCA local projects and premises, and a YMCA Training Centre and another office for a separate scheme called "Dads and Lads Project".

There was a clear case of the tail wagging the dog. The build up of resentment that this caused in the governance systems of the English Movement is still being played out today 20 years later. It is the asserting of the pre-eminence of local autonomy of the basis of the YMCA structure that is reasserting itself.

Worse was to follow. Leases had been taken out for 10, 20, 25 years on training centres. Staff had been given contracts after sometimes 15 years continuous service. Then the economy of the country improved. The Government's need for a Youth Training programme diminished. Contracts became less lucrative. The product was less wanted. The market diminished or disappeared. This is the downfall of contracts. At least grant aid was more secure! Or is it?

The YMCA of Wales by reassessing the effect the success of the MSC YTS contract managed to avert the crippling warfare that ensues when a servicing body becomes a major player in the market of provision, in competition with the constituent membership.

The YMCA in Wales also began to react to the ever increasing red tape that the MSC bureaucracy was insistent upon. They spent a lot of time assessing their willingness to proceed with new contracts. It is fair to say that there was an increasing and healthy suspicion of the efficacy of contracts, with the MSC. There were several reasons for this. Firstly the number of young people who needed the hope of a YTS programme diminished. Thus the desire of the YMCA to meet this community need diminished. Secondly the cost of administering the ever more intrusive MSC demands brought into question the need to self inflict this kind of interference. Thirdly the returns from the contract price were ever more squeezed and so the profit motive was going or gone.

And so after 5 years of contracts and co-operation the YMCAs in Wales began to withdraw from the bidding process. The cashflow consequences were minimal. Because of the gradual run down there were no costly redundancy payments. Whereas in England the demise of the Special MSC programmes caused upheaval in staff and monetary ways.

The Welsh YMCA movement learnt a lot from this relationship with the MSC. It became acutely aware of the dangers of being too closely tied to any one type of funding. This is true whether it be Grant Aid, Lottery Funding or sole contractor funding. We have learnt that a diversity of sources of funding give sustainability. This is the watch word Sustainability. We have tried to move away from seeking the current funding stream exclusively, and to build in managerial safeguards to sustain the local or National YMCA. The 4 nature of our contracts and Service Level Agreements, which are the contracts between youth service providers, and general agreements for funding have become more detailed. They are explicit in the monitoring, outcomes and performance indicators in the contracts. They have formal procedures which monitor interference. We are confident enough to rewrite contracts and to alter clauses.

Because of our Relationship with the MSC the YMCA became a movement aware of the true role of local YMCAs and national councils. These boundaries were redefined. Because of The Relationship with the MSC we became much better at defining our product and marketing it. We have been able to take the new found practice and experiences and use them with The Further Education Funding Council and now ELWa. We have been able to contract with Employment Services on specialist New Deal Courses, and we have built contractually sound contracts with Social Services, Trusts, Funders which have allowed the YMCA in Wales to grow.

Our relationship with the MSC was a bit like falling in love for the first time. The first blush of excitement gives way to a realisation of the flaws in the relationship, and learning from this subsequent relationships are shaped by they experience. Working with MSC was exciting, demanding, time consuming but ultimately rewarding for the YMCA and the Youth Service in Wales.