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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 27 February 2021 – “Mental Health Foundation CEO is right to speak out”

Advocacy is a tricky task. While you are working to achieve the best outcome for the individual or group of people you are advocating for, you have to be mindful of the other party's policies and regulations. In my experience the best advocacy results happen when there is a good relationship between the advocate and the organisation, with whom there is an issue. It can be a win win for both sides when the dissatisfied punter receives an acceptable outcome and the organisation in question no longer has a disgruntled client. To do this well an advocate needs to have a thorough understanding of how the organisation in question usually deals (or is supposed to deal) with complaints.

There is often a process of escalation -and it pays to follow that process. If for example, you go straight to the top - the General Manager or a Politician you are more than likely to be booted down the chain of command back to where you started. However sometimes following an organisation's internal road map of complaint management may not work. You may get lost Sometimes! Sometimes you need to take arms against a sea of trouble and draw a line in the sand. Sometimes you need to be prepared to bite the hand that feeds you.

This week Shaun Robinson the CEO of Mental Health Foundation came out fighting. He claimed that the Ministry of Health was trying to gag him after the Foundation delivered a press release that referred to a Wellbeing study that the Foundation had commissioned. It stated 25 per cent of New Zealanders over 18 years old had poor wellbeing. The press release called for Ministry of Health and Prime Minister to show that they were taking action on the He Ara Oranga Mental Health Actions that were released in 2018.

Apparently not long after the press release Robinson got a sound tongue lashing from a Senior Official from the Ministry of Health reminding him that his Organisation had a “No Surprises” Policy and the contract with the Ministry of Health included a clause relating to that.

There have been numerous news articles about the legality of whether the Foundation could criticise the government or not, focussing in on a clause in the contract. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern responded that Shaun Robinson is absolutely entitled to make those comments and I do see them as part of his job. He should be able to and should speak freely. I'm sure every advocacy organisation in New Zealand will be heartened to hear that declaration. However, the real issues of the story seem to have been diluted.

The fact that Mental Health providers are not seeing any changes to improve Mental Health Services on the ground since the recommendation of the He Ara Oranga Mental Health Actions - the fact that New Zealand continues to have the highest prevalence of suicide in the developed world, seems to be somewhat lost.

And that needs to be found and quickly.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.