

# LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

HOW ARE LEADERS OF THERAPY BUSINESSES NEGOTIATING THEIR WAY THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES? **VICKI PALMER**, CEO OF OASIS-TALK AND BACP HEALTHCARE EXECUTIVE MEMBER, SHARES HER EXPERIENCE

Nearly six years ago, some self-employed colleagues and I took a risk. We set up a community interest company (not-for-profit social enterprise) called Oasis-Talk, in response to the Health and Social Care Act, which the coalition UK Government had passed on an election manifesto promise not to touch the NHS. In South Gloucestershire PCT (now CCG), there was already a good primary mental healthcare service, which had been working well for seven years. To preserve the quality of the service, which was to be closed in October 2012 (as a direct result of the new UK Government's agenda), we set up Oasis-Talk, enabling us to retain valued staff, and as somewhere from which to bid for the new 'any qualified provider' (AQP) services being trialled by the coalition UK Government.

It was a very challenging time as we continued to deliver and preserve the existing service, while preparing staff and operations to transition into a completely new delivery that had never been trialled before, without any break in service. We were scared, motivated, determined and focused as we put in place all that we needed to, one step at a time.

## WORKFORCE

Initially, Oasis-Talk comprised 20 self-employed staff and one employed staff member from the previous service. The commissioners' zero hours contract with us was unnerving in our new environment, especially as the organisation making the referrals to us had a block contract to undertake the assessments, but was also an AQP in competition with us. However, we soon discovered that the volume of clients needing to be seen meant that there was plenty of business for all of us; we gained confidence to take on full-time staff, and have since grown the team to 60 staff.

We have also danced the delicate dance of co-operation with valued colleagues in other organisations, with whom we are competitor collaborators. Clinically this has been easy, but operationally there was much that needed to be ironed out at the start.

## FINANCING

As we faced a changed climate in business loans, I personally risked my own finance for the set-up costs and had to offer personal guarantees against personal assets to set up an overdraft. Even though I was confident in our business model, I would not do that again. It set up a dynamic that left the organisation dependent on one person (me), and it has taken five years to change that dynamic to a healthier collective responsibility.

Looking back, I am not sure we really knew the scale of the challenge at the start, but it became bigger as we grew. With each phase of growth, it has been important to do the financial and workforce planning before embarking on the change. Sometimes this has needed to be done at great speed to make the most of each new emerging possibility.

## COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

A consistently positive attitude to the challenges has helped sustain us and the organisation. It is an amazing team effort, and continues to be a very positive problem-solving environment. The more we discover, the more we realise how much more there is to learn.

In 2018, as we enter our sixth year, we are celebrating not only that we have survived the changes of uncertain times, but that we have improved the quality and extended the quantity of counselling services that we provide. It was always our intention to keep available the choice of counselling and to help clients get the best fit intervention for themselves and their presentation. We now offer counselling, CBT, EMDR, psycho-education courses and couples therapy to NHS patients in Bristol and South Gloucestershire CCGs.

## NOTICE THE SMALL THINGS

Right from the start, I've found it helpful to ask myself the question: what is going to make the most difference to our service users? This has become our organisation's guiding principle when making

decisions, both large and small. Of course, it was important to have good supervision, line management and communication, but on reflection, I've noticed that paying attention to the small things has made the most difference to us as a therapy business, and consequently, to our clients. In the interest of sharing this with our community and other leaders of therapy businesses, I would highlight the following as being the most significant:

- The welcome that service users experience when they first contact Oasis-Talk is of paramount importance. This is usually on the phone, and I have delighted in the friendly voices of our administrative staff, who are a first point of contact. A warm, professional, friendly voice makes a big difference.
- The welcome that staff experience at recruitment and induction when they first meet us.
- Recruiting staff who can build relationships quickly and easily and who want to put the service user at the centre of how they do what they do.
- Giving staff time for reflective practice and CPD every week, and providing them with the opportunity for developing special interest groups.
- Trialling longer assessment sessions (one-and-a-half hours), which allow for some therapeutic input, has provided some very interesting results, such as discovering that one session has been sufficient for 39 per cent of clients, and has significantly helped the progress of the subsequent therapy for others. This pilot will be published shortly.
- Helping staff to understand the organisational context in which they are working, both locally and nationally, enables an understanding of the significance of everything they do. The clinical significance for the client in front of them happens through a whole chain of organisational, societal and political interconnections and does not only depend on what happens in the counselling room. This enhances the interest and efficacy of our work.

My own background is as a person-centred therapist, and it has been both a pleasure and a challenge to bring my understanding of that approach to the development of both the organisation and the service. Valuing all the participant stakeholders in this venture, accepting our differences and similarities, understanding different priorities and common goals, and aiming to find a congruent path between them all, have been the challenges. Within this climate, it is my hope that positive change will happen for our clients, bringing positive change to the many contexts surrounding our work.

#### WORKING MORE WIDELY

One of the benefits of being a community interest company is that we have the freedom to develop smaller community-based services in a different way to meet specific needs. Currently, we are funding an elders' community worker, who is working with older adults in black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities to adapt our usual ways of working to fit their culture and values, free of the restrictions and demands of a universal service such as the NHS.

While change does bring uncertainty, the rapid changes in the external world also offer us opportunities. I believe that our work as therapists means that we are well placed to discover and follow those opportunities to bring about a safer, kinder world for all of us. However, one of the challenges for the counselling profession is to encourage increased awareness of both the systemic impact on our work, and of our work. Rather than seeing this as a threat, I would encourage reflection on how information, such as outcome measuring, can influence the wider environment by reducing mental health stigma and raising awareness of the impact of our actions on others.

I believe that counselling training that includes awareness of a systems approach could enhance the therapy of the future. Without this, I think there is a danger of augmenting an individualist approach to living, at the expense of wider co-operation and connection, which are fundamental to mental and

emotional wellbeing. Working in an organisational context, we can make a difference in a short space of time to individuals from diverse backgrounds, respecting that they will find their own meanings within their own values and paradigms. It also helps a therapist to think systemically, which greatly helps clients, because all clients live and work in groups. We are essentially social beings who need to connect with others for our emotional health and the health of our communities. We cannot have one without the other. If we only focus on the intrapsychic aspects of our clients' inner lives, we do them a great disservice, as we can potentially alienate them from the groups where they belong. Belonging is crucial for health.

#### CHALLENGES

I do not want to pretend that the last five years have been easy, because they have not. However, it has proved to me what is possible in uncertain and difficult times, if we are prepared to think differently and do things differently. We need a clear focus on getting things as right as we can for our clients, within the context of the NHS and the wider world, which is going through an immense period of uncertainty and instability.

If I were to make any suggestions for therapists looking to set up their own service, they would be:

- think differently from others
- do something different to what has been done before or do it in a different way
- keep the client's experience as the guide and measure of all that you do
- think creatively about how to better support your therapists within limited resources.

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is a lot of talk about 'finding balance' in a chaotic world, and I think that balance is going to be necessary if we are to do more joined-up thinking as we listen to and take notice of the many different voices in our society.

We can choose to be overwhelmed by such a Herculean task, or we can choose to add our small piece to the jigsaw puzzle by taking first one step and then another, doing what we can, where we can and how we can, without condemning others who are getting on with their own step-by-step approach. We will achieve more by collaborating to find a balance of ideas and approaches than we ever will by running each other into the ground. Oasis-Talk is simply adding our piece to the whole jigsaw.

*Vicki Palmer is a BACP senior accredited counsellor and supervisor with a specialist interest in therapy in primary care. She has also developed and taught on counselling and supervision diploma courses in England and Scotland, and is the CEO of Oasis-Talk. Vicki is a member of the BACP Healthcare Executive.*

#### READER RESPONSE

The author would welcome feedback on this article. To contact her, please email [hcpj.editorial@bacp.co.uk](mailto:hcpj.editorial@bacp.co.uk)

