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From time to time I see or hear something that I think is worth sharing. This blog serves this purpose. It is an ongoing work in progress that I will add to from time to time.

My hope is that what interests and shapes me personally and professionally may be of interest to others. If something I share resonates for you, I welcome your contributions and feedback.

18 June 2018

Culture of Care or Culture of Punishment?

Following on from my last blog that introduced Max Harris’s work, I have been giving considerable thought to values-based politics. This fits so well with the values-based practices I have been developing for my work with organisations. There are a couple of recent examples that have refined my thinking further.

The first involves me personally. A local citizen from my home town set up an initiative which she called “Pick it up now”. She arranged for a community beach clean-up which was advertised through community radio and Facebook (Sanderson, 14 June 2018). The event was a tremendous success, with over 80 local people turning up to walk along the coast and pick up rubbish. It was a beautiful Winter’s day and a great opportunity for exercise and community spirit. As I joined with neighbours in picking up rubbish, I thought about the idea of community and how it belongs to citizens. So often, I hear the ‘them and us’ position being expressed. For example, “They, ‘the local Council’ should keep our town and reserves clean and maintained. We ‘the ratepayers’ shouldn’t have to. Of course, the Council do have some responsibility to contribute to this work. However, the citizens of the town can work in partnership with the council. Rather than an either/or position, a values-based culture involves a both/and spirit of partnership. People, Council and other parties can collaboratively care for and support each other and our environment.

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The second example is drawn from a recent media story. It involved a sales person making racist comments to a colleague about their client. The comments were unintentionally recorded on the client’s answerphone. This understandably caused considerable offense to the client, who spoke out in the hope that accountability would be taken. The story was discussed by a panel on a national television current affairs program (TVNZ, 10 June 2018). One panel member said, “That salesman needs help”. The panel chair responded, “He probably needs the sack doesn’t he?”. What this highlighted for me, are two very different positions – a position of care and a position of punishment. I began to speculate the human, emotional and economic costs and benefits of each position. Take a
moment to consider this. The latter tends to be the most familiar and dominant response. Yet, to me, the former would potentially involve the least costs and the most benefits. There seem to be very rich opportunities for education and restorative outcomes that are likely to exceed the emotional, human and financial costs to the company, employees and their families of firing the employees. On the program, it was reported by a company spokesperson that the company and salesperson had made full and unreserved apologies. Furthermore, the company committed to provide a company-wide (including the sales person concerned) cultural and historical awareness program. This seemed to me to reflect a culture of care and support. A few days later in an online news article (TVNZ, 13 June 2018), it was announced the sales people concerned had been stood down pending an employment investigation.

I don’t know the circumstances, beyond what I heard and read in the media reports. However, I can’t help but think that the steps of apology and awareness education reflects a culture of care, whilst standing people down and embarking on an employment investigation reflects a culture of punishment.

What is your response to this example? As a leader, how would you respond to this situation? Is your position one of care or punishment?

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I continue to notice many examples that involve decisions between punishment and care. Currently, the NZ Labour Government is confronting the question of building more prisons to house an ever-burgeoning number of prisoners, or changing ways of managing offending and offenders? The first involves doing more of the same, which clearly isn’t working. The second requires culture change and the challenging of ideas such as ‘prison keeps the offenders locked away and the community safe’. A recent example of a culture of care being adopted is Housing New Zealand’s change of policy from evicting state house tenants who use P to offering help and support. Let’s not leave it to ‘them’ - the Government or other institutions to fix things. As citizens or visitors in this country, we can decide whether we take up a stance of care or a stance of punishment. There is research and examples to show that a stance of care is cheaper and more effective in the long term, can contribute to values-based political culture and a more caring, safe community.

References
Sanderson, J. (14 June 2018) Pick it up now Facebook Site. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=pick%20it%20up%20now%20kuranui%20bay%20beach%20clean%20up.


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