

The Role of HR

Kerri-ann Jones
HR Director, The Benevolent Society

**Australian Association of Gerontology
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Benevolent Society**

ROLE OF GOOD HR PRACTICE IN PREVENTING ABUSE OF OLDER PEOPLE.

This session concentrates on the sort of best-practice HR systems we should all have in place in order to develop a workforce in which the risk of abuse is minimised – the emphasis is on prevention.

I focus on 4 particular areas – they are really just good common sense: good HR practices that help create a culture that minimises the risk of abuse are the same as those that help to build good workplace cultures generally.

Key HR elements

Prevention is far better than cure...

- Recruitment & selection
- Induction
- Ongoing education & communication
- Create the culture

1. THE RECRUITING & SELECTION PROCESS:

The recruitment and selection part of management can be frustrating – it's not uncommon for managers to find that they need to fill a vacancy urgently and there doesn't seem to be enough time to do it properly. I believe that the attention up front is usually worth the effort if it helps to avoid a problem later on. We all know that maxim: there's never enough time to do it properly but we always have to find the time to fix it when it goes wrong.

Recruitment & selection

Establish clear expectations up front...

- Position description
- Selection process (eg interview)
- Reference checks
- Criminal record checks

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Position descriptions: If you haven't done it recently, I suggest you check to confirm that your position descriptions contain clear statements of expectations regarding appropriate behaviour. For example, it could be as broad as a statement that the employee will behave in a manner consistent with the organisation's Code of Conduct, or it could be more specific such as a comment about being responsible for the protection of clients' rights and dignity, or being responsible for doing no harm, etc. They can vary in style and don't need to be lengthy statements, but a reference in the Position Description is often one of the first means available to you for sending a message regarding expectations.

Selection process: provides an opportunity to understand the mind-set of prospective employees. For example, if you are interviewing a potential Community Care Worker do you ask such questions as "In this organisation we are committed to maintaining the dignity of the older people we work with. Can you tell us what you would do if you suspected one of your clients was being abused by someone?" A question like this

gives you the opportunity to explore if they already have an understanding of what signs to look for or if they believe they should refer it to someone, etc.

Similarly, if you are interviewing for the role of Manager of a Residential Aged Care Facility, do you ask questions such as “Tell us what systems and processes you have previously implemented to ensure that any risk of abuse of residents was minimised.” Or, “Tell us what you would do if a PCA came to you with an allegation of abuse against a fellow employee” and so on. What these questions do is put people on notice firstly that there is an expectation that they will alert for evidence of abuse and also that they are expected to deal with it in an appropriate way.

Reference checks: a critical aspect of the recruiting and selection process. We all think we can “tell” about someone from an interview. But the research provides some pretty clear evidence that interviews can be one of the least effective means of determining suitability for a role. There are things you can do to improve their effectiveness (such as having a structured process and asking behaviourally based questions and so on) but whatever process you use, it’s really critical to check references.

Ask questions that seek to draw out any concerns from previous employers and listen carefully to any avoidance of questions, or to equivocal answers and probe any areas if you don’t feel comfortable with the response.

Criminal record checks: recommended for any employee whose role will require them dealing directly with an older person. (So, for example, you may decide that the accounts clerk in head office who never visits any sites may be exempt from a criminal check. The Benevolent Society does criminal record checks on all new employees, irrespective of their role and it is a condition of their ongoing employment that the check comes back OK or with an acceptable level of risk.)

There is a financial cost to this and it is not foolproof, but we think it is a worthwhile investment. In the first instance, just advising people we will do a criminal record check and asking them to sign a consent form authorising us to do this sends a powerful message and we have actually had a few people withdraw their application at this point.

It’s important to note here however, that a criminal record does not necessarily result in exclusion of that person – if a prospective employee advises us of a past record and/or their check comes back with a record then we do a risk assessment. For example, if the criminal record involved culpable driving offences and the role in our

organisation does not involve any driving we might consider that risk to be at a more acceptable level than, say, if the record involved theft or assault.

2. INDUCTION:

Induction

Let people know “how we work here”...

- Code of Conduct
- Initial training

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Once people start work with you it's vital that the messages given in the recruitment phase are endorsed. Eg at The Benevolent Society, at the time they receive their letter of offer to work with us, all new employees also receive a copy of our Code of Conduct that deals with the standards of behaviour with which all employees of the Society are required to comply. It is mostly expressed in a very positive way however it does contain the explicit statement that employees will “refrain from any abusive, neglectful or exploitative behaviour.” This needs to be signed by all new employees and if a signed copy of the Code is not received with their new starter paperwork then our HR people follow up before the employee is entered into the payroll.

Also, as part of the induction to their new role, employees will receive specific on-the-job training regarding local processes and procedures. This training should include what to do in the event that they see something that could indicate abuse. At the very least, staff need to know who to tell.

3. ONGOING EDUCATION & COMMUNICATION:

Whether through regular team briefings or meetings or an annual training event, staff need to be kept up to date about issues in this area – eg, this could involve addressing legislative or accreditation requirements regarding preventing abuse, or guidance in recognising evidence of possible abuse, and so on.

In such sessions it's important staff understand the underlying issues and why it's important not to turn a blind eye and why it's also not necessary to imagine the worse from a bruise that may have been the result of an innocent accident (for example the older person may simply have knocked themselves.) So it's about helping them understand how to act appropriately.

It's also important that co-ordinators and manager receive guidance and understand how to have conversations with staff who may have suspicions. This is an important skill – staff shouldn't feel interrogated and managers shouldn't attempt to guide the employee by making leading statements or putting words in their mouth.

Ongoing education, communication

Don't shirk the tough messages...

- Keep staff well-informed
- Describe issues clearly & concisely
- Have frank discussions of thorny issues

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4. CREATE THE CULTURE:

Over and above the importance of having good HR practices in place is the need to create a culture that enables your organisation to act reliably if abuse is identified.

“Don't dob in a mate?”: employees often don't want to inform on someone (whether it's an employee or family member, say) that they suspect of abusing an older person for 2 particular reasons: firstly, Australians don't "dob" and secondly, they may have had experiences of "shooting the messenger." If this is an issue in your organisation, even though it will have been implicitly addressed through all of the proceeding steps outlined above, it's essential to be explicit about requirements in this area. This is not about creating a culture of hysteria and suspicion, but employees do need to know both their legal and their moral obligations about this.

Create the Culture

Encourage a supportive climate...

- “Dob in a mate?”
- Respect people's rights
- Manage performance
- Leadership

Respect people's rights: one way to support the development of an enhanced culture is by acting in ways that demonstrate respect for the rights of the various people involved. There are a number of people whose rights need to be protected if abuse is identified, for example the older person who may have been abused and also their family, as well as the employee against whom an allegation of abuse is made and other staff who may have informed on a colleague.

Manage performance: If you have all the HR practices in place discussed above – eg good position descriptions, signed codes of conduct, ongoing training and education and so on (so you're being really clear in setting expectations) then you have a good base from which to act if any of your employees do behave inappropriately. Most of you will have access to employer groups or associations who provide industrial advice on performance management so if you don't have in-house HR support then I urge you to access the external support available for this.

If you observe or are advised of inappropriate behaviour take action. It may be that an employee has spoken inappropriately (such as an unnecessarily loud voice or handling someone more firmly than is required) and in the first instance perhaps an informal performance counselling session is required (it may be, for example, that the employee thought they were doing the right thing by raising their voice in order to be heard and understood, without realising that they had spoken too loudly and this had distressed their client.) Again, it's a matter of reiterating the required performance standards and helping them see any gaps between what is required and what they're delivering. But if such gaps continue, then a more formal disciplinary process may

need to be initiated. And, if improvement is noted, make sure the improvement is rewarded (for example, a verbal acknowledgement at a suitable time.)

The practice of managing performance is important for two particular reasons – a) it sends a clear message and b) it may prevent a pattern of behaviour escalating into something worse. So the initial probationary period is particularly important – during this period we need to make sure that performance and behaviour are monitored and any irregularities are addressed as soon as they become evident.

Leadership: finally, it's up to all of us to show leadership in demonstrating that abuse will not be tolerated; it's up to all of us to establish a collaborative environment and build trust so that employees and clients can feel safe in sharing any concerns or suspicions they may have.