

Leadership-in-Action Report

Introduction

Lismore is a relatively small town located in the Northern Rivers region of Australia, about three hours south of Brisbane. It lies within the lands of the Bundjalong people's nation area. The town is renowned for its history of floods, with the 2022 flood being the highest ever recorded, reaching a staggering level of 14.4 meters. The devastation from this event caused widespread damage, leading to both individual and collective trauma within the community. In the wake of such a disaster, the need for support and assistance was greater than ever.

Social Futures is an organization committed to achieving positive social change in communities like Lismore. Their mission is to build inclusive communities where everyone is respected and supported. They work to ensure that people can thrive by connecting them with the right support at the right time as they collaborate with communities, organizations, and government entities. Social Futures tackles a range of social challenges, including homelessness, housing, youth and family support, mental health and wellbeing, disability inclusion and services for seniors. Their goal is to build stronger, more resilient communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Project and Challenges

The first part of the project involved analyzing the database and making improvement recommendations, with a key focus on protecting the privacy of sensitive personal data. This included examining how data was captured, recorded, and analyzed, all with the aim of enhancing the quality of service and improving the safety of both personnel and clients. Through this process, I gained a deeper understanding of how the organization operates and adapts to the changing needs of the flood-affected population. One of the most interesting aspects was being able to compare trends, such as incidents or specific needs within certain communities. It was also fascinating to notice that some incidents occurred periodically, leading to discussions on how resources could be managed more effectively to address these recurring issues.

The second part of the project, transitioning from data analysis to fieldwork, proved to be the most challenging. Engaging directly with communities that have been traumatized by the floods was an eye-opening and memorable experience. Adapting to each individual and making them feel comfortable was initially the most difficult aspect for me. The primary goal of the field visits was to educate and obtain client signatures to initiate procedures for various government services. These visits also served as an opportunity to check on the wellbeing of residents in flood-affected areas.

Working within two distinct teams presented its own set of challenges. Initially, I struggled with how to respond to the stories shared by clients and how best to support the workers. However, after a few visits, I began to adapt and gain confidence in my role. Another

challenge was learning to adjust to the differing approaches of each team member, as everyone had their own unique style of conducting these visits. Through this experience, I learned the importance of flexibility and collaboration in supporting communities during their recovery journey.

This journey also deepened my understanding of social disadvantages and their often interconnected and self-perpetuating nature. For instance, the data analysis revealed how financial hardship, housing instability, domestic violence, neglect, and poor mental health frequently coexist and reinforce each other. I observed firsthand the challenges faced by Indigenous Australians, who also suffer disproportionately from intergenerational trauma and systemic neglect. I saw that a multi-dimensional organization like Social Futures, which addresses these issues collectively, is far more effective in breaking the cycle of disadvantage compared to treating each problem in isolation. The collaborative efforts of various program teams to offer warm referrals and a holistic support network to clients were particularly striking, and the success of this integrated approach was evident in the positive outcomes achieved.

Leadership Development

During this LiA, I was able to put into practice many of the skills and knowledge I gained throughout the year, particularly in the areas of social and professional interactions. Engaging with communities that had experienced life-altering and traumatic events prompted me to continually reassess and adapt how I socialize with others. This experience allowed me to refine my communication style, making it more sensitive and responsive to the needs of those I was interacting with.

Additionally, I had the chance to further develop my ability to collaborate with coworkers who had diverse and often vastly different life experiences from my own. Working in this type of non profit, which attracts people from varied backgrounds, exposed me to colleagues who had themselves lived through fascinating and sometimes deeply moving personal stories. This diversity challenged me to adapt my interaction style to better connect with my team, enhancing my ability to work effectively in a multicultural environment.

I also had opportunities to confront and challenge my own cultural biases. Growing up in Switzerland, I had little exposure to natural disasters and their impact on mental health, nor to non-European cultures more broadly. This left me somewhat oblivious to the biases in my perception of the world. However, through workshops like the “Cross Cultural Communication” session, I felt equipped to explore Australian culture, including how its history and recent events, such as floods, have shaped the affected populations. This experience was invaluable in broadening my understanding and helping me approach these communities with greater empathy and cultural sensitivity.

Conclusion

This project with Social Futures in Lismore was an enriching experience that highlighted the role of community support organizations in times of crisis. Analyzing data and transitioning to

fieldwork allowed me to understand how Social Futures adapts to the evolving needs of these communities. This journey taught me the importance of adaptability, empathy, and collaboration.

Working directly with diverse communities and teams challenged me to refine my communication skills and confront my own cultural biases. Engaging with individuals who had lived through trauma broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of the impact of natural disasters on mental health.

Overall, this experience strengthened my commitment to supporting communities and demonstrated the value of responsive, compassionate service in helping people thrive amid adversity.