



Is your Shed's Management Committee Managing the Shed ?

Earlier this year AMSA published an article about the '*Top Ten Threats to Men's Sheds*'- we received a huge amount of positive feedback to this article and numerous requests to do more articles that are appropriate to the effective management of Men's Sheds. Often members of Sheds and committees request information on good governance, concerns that their Shed's committee is not effectively managing the Shed and, one of the main ongoing concerns we all have, is for ongoing governance and financial management for a prosperous viable future.

After reviewing the issues of concern we have come up with a series of issues Men's Sheds and their management committees should consider.

The expectations of Men's Shed are getting higher from both the members and the community but budgetary constraints are getting tighter and with less resources.

Men's Sheds do not necessarily need to turn a profit each year but they do need to remain financially viable. There is a strong culture within the movement that is becoming more reliant on grant funding than generating sustainable funding. Some Sheds believe that grant funds are a given right and Sheds can only exist on grants to develop and survive.

As Men's Sheds we are still a very new concept to Australian society and culture but we are already proving our worth to our communities and within the Male Health sector but we need to learn from other organisations and the challenges they have faced just how we can teach others from the innovations that Men's Sheds have introduced.

Succession and Strategic Planning - One of the drawbacks with having a Constitution based on model rules is that it is a requirement that the Shed as an Association holds an Annual General Meeting each year and elects the Committee.

This is good and bad:

- ✚ One it gives the members the democratic capacity to vote out one or all of the committee if they are doing a terrible job but
- ✚ On the other hand, a new committee can have new ideas that are not consistent with the plans previously made, which usually had expenditure associated with them and there we have the classic lack of consistent planning.

A good Strategic Plan should be approved by all the members and set in place for at least a 3 year period or until the objectives are reached so that a newly elected Committee cannot change the agreed principal aims without going back to the membership.

Some Constitutions include a system where a certain number of Committee members must resign each year and some are retained as a means of Succession Planning. These can be very complicated and in many cases people do not serve the required time to make this effective.

Another approach that Rotary Clubs have successfully adopted is that they vote for an incoming Chair or President - a Chairman elect who serves as a Vice Chair or President- and it is not a vote for the position to take effect immediately. The Chair will serve for a defined period (2-3 years) and when the newly elected officer, who has just had several years learning the role, takes on the new role, the retiring person takes a position on the Committee as the Previous Past Chair. This is a very simple and effective way of having a good Succession Plan.

Prioritise - Often the needs of the members and the Men's Shed itself get neglected. The Committee is so focused on doing the new extension they neglect the day to day requirements of maintaining the existing infrastructure and equipment. The decline of equipment and lack of materials often leads to member dissatisfaction and in turn lower membership numbers. The Shed may end up with a great new extension, office or storage shed but no members and a Men's Shed without the men is just another shed.

Dreams of destiny - We have seen many Men's Shed Committees having received a grant of sufficient funds to build a Shed but not enough to build the big Shed so they delay operations until they can fix the budget shortfall. Build the Shed to what you have not what the Committee dreams of. A smaller Shed is better than none at all. Nearly all Men's Sheds exist on Government land of some sort being Crown or Council land. These resources are under demand; use it or lose it applies here.

Democratic Structure of Men's Sheds - All Men's Sheds are incorporated entities, generally under State legislation and have a democratic system of governance with a Management Committee or Board that makes decisions on behalf of the members. These are usually elected by the members on an annual basis. This is the usual Australian system for incorporated bodies such as clubs and societies. This has been the adopted model for Men's Sheds as well but in Australia we may be too democratic for our own good, just look at what democracy has done for politics!

Not all the people elected to govern our country necessarily have the required ability, hence why we have a complex system of governance between the elected government and the Departmental bureaucracy managing the day to day affairs of the government and let's make sure we never get that complicated.

Under this system critical constitutional decisions usually require as Extraordinary General Meeting where over 75% of member approval may be necessary. This is becoming more and more common as many Men's Sheds adopted Model Rules when they incorporated and now they wish to change the Constitution more to suit the needs more specifically for a Men's Shed. Now getting a 75% vote of approval is going to be a very high hurdle especially when many members are going to have a "What's in it for me" or an "I know better" attitude. Self-interests and personal agendas also come into play. This is where we get the person who we described in the previous article as the "Self-Important Peacock" who is going to argue just because he can.

So what's the solution? Committee or Board members have a legal and financial responsibility to the Shed. While members have an interest, they do not have the same level of responsibility and quite often will have a self interest.

Some well-run Sheds have two levels of management. This was very common in the early days of Men's Sheds where quite sizable government grants were applied and coordinators were employed (something of a dinosaur now) but the two level structure makes a lot of sense.

A Committee of Shed members to discuss the needs of the members and to act as a conduit to convey this to the Management Committee who has the legal and financial responsibility to make the final decision and consist of volunteers who bring the necessary skills to the committee or Board. Now I agree this two tiered level is only going to be able to be applied in the larger shed as many Sheds in rural and regional areas may only have 20 members, so this is totally impractical, but it seems that it is the larger Sheds that are having these issues anyway.

Lack of expertise and too many experts - We have a great skills base within the Shed movement but quite often Sheds do not recognize the skills needed and a big mistake made by many Sheds is not finding a balance of the necessary skills required for a Committee. Just because a person has been successful in their field doesn't mean they are going to be a good member of the Committee. The last thing a Shed needs is a Committee that consists of multiple retired accountants, businessmen, carpenters or lawyers and personality traits that can interfere with sound judgement. When someone believes that they are the smartest or most successful person in the Shed then they can become the most troublesome as well.

The secret to having a successful Committee is diversity from a wide range of backgrounds and member representation. A solution can be to adopt honorary positions to the Committee that will fulfill shortfalls in skills available within the Shed membership.

Ambition to be the biggest and best Men's Shed - We have emphasized this before but it can never be emphasized enough. Many Committees start from the outset aiming at developing the biggest Men's Shed in the area and well beyond the needs of the members or the community. They can spend huge amounts of money on building a Shed without knowing what the requirements or the potential future of the Shed are.

Hope and ambition are not a strategy. We have seen Men's Sheds built over the past 6 years that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and have gone over budget, leaving the Committee searching for more funds. More alarming is that once the Shed has been completed they have had no funds left for fit out or tools. In one particular case after spending enough money (received in grants) to build 10 decent Men's Sheds the Shed Committee were applying for funds to buy tools even before they had any members.

Why do you want to be on the Committee? - People often want to be on the Committee for different reasons not realizing the work and responsibility that goes with it. Many potential Committee members want to make a mark for themselves and many of them form the opinion that something is wrong or even corrupt and start out with a vendetta to change or to rule.

People in positions of control often get emotionally committed for good and bad and the Men's Shed makes up a major part of their life.

In the Men's Shed world we all know that we are here for the prevention of social isolation,

an issue that faces many men in life after work or even within their working life. As we aim to attract socially isolated men, we may also attract people who are socially isolated because they have become socially un-acceptable and have a track record of creating trouble in other organizations. This is quite a controversial issue but one that has to be mentioned.

Most of the trouble we deal with within Men's Sheds is where a member who joins the Shed and/or the Committee wants to change the direction of the Men's Shed to do activities that they want. If you want to do a specific activity there are many clubs that already exist that specializes in photography, art, music or even woodwork. The activities of a Men's Shed have to be the choice of the Men's Shed members, not those of one individual. After all, you wouldn't join a Bowling Club and insist that everyone now plays golf. Men's Sheds all aim to be socially inclusive and accepting of everyone and there is no magic solution to this problem but the loudest voice in the room is not the only voice.

Inclusion and Exclusion - The Management Committee is not operating an exclusive club. One of the great achievements that many other organizations recognize in our brief history is how we have successfully engaged men within the community. From time to time we hear of Sheds becoming exclusive groups. It is the responsibility of the Committee to encourage new members and create a culture within the Shed of acceptance. One Shed recently informed us that when a new member joins their Shed they have a rule of not asking them "*what did you do in life*" as all stereotypes and social status are left at the door along with any attitudes.

Maintaining a healthy membership is probably the most important part of the Committee as without members there is no Committee and no purpose. We are Men's Sheds and social inclusion and engagement of men is one of our great achievements and one that other organizations are learning from us.

Listening to the Experts – It is much easier than it sounds because if you take the time to ask, everyone is an expert. A good tip for management is always to validate an unqualified opinion and not to take everything as a guarantee. People will always voice their expert advice but do they always have the experience or qualification to voice it?

On the floor in the Shed, members who are trades people or have experience will be able to provide the best advice on things such as maintenance or the quality of the equipment and this is a valuable asset for the Committee. If in doubt it is always best to seek a second opinion- a Committee needs to make sound judgment and sound judgment comes from good validated advice- don't believe everything you hear.

A good Committee member should always make a decision without prejudice. The secret to good management is listening to the experts and making good judgment.

There are no quick fixes to maintain a healthy governing Committee especially in consideration of the dynamic environment of Men's Sheds and our brief history. Unlike other comparable community service and sporting national organizations or Peak Bodies AMSA has never implemented a standard set of governance rules or governing process as a requirement of membership. To do this would have hindered the evolution of this grass roots movement.

In hindsight it may have made Sheds governance issues much easier today but would have certainly changed the path of development. It is in some ways one of the great things about Men's Sheds - each one is different but similar at the same time, each one is diverse and it is the Men in the Shed that create the Shed's personality and the Management Committee is the custodian.

"Knowing your weaknesses is a great strength to have, not knowing your strength is your weaknesses"