‘Real life’ training - learning together

Having been a dementia care trainer for the last 15 years, I have always been the first critic of classroom style teaching. In terms of really making things happen back in the workplace. However engaging the trainer, participants inevitably find it difficult to put ideas into practice; often because they lack the confidence, sometimes because they don't feel sufficiently supported and enabled by their managers, and sometimes simply because it is easy to just go back to doing things in the same old way.

It has been fantastic to have been able to do more training in care homes which involves working alongside staff in lounges, with a particular focus on improving conversation and activity opportunities throughout the whole day. There have been some essential elements of this which managers and senior staff might find helpful:

One resident asked with a smile: ‘What’s different today? Everyone seems to be smiling more!’

Give time for observing the current reality in the care setting

At Dementia Care Matters, we use a particular audit tool which is explained in David Sheard's book 'Enabling Quality of Life - an evaluation tool', which is relatively easy for staff to learn and enables them to watch and assess the level of social interaction, 'neutral' periods of care and any negative aspects of care approaches happening in the communal areas.

Giving some focused time in the day for staff to sit to one side and really observe the lived experience of people living in the home can be incredibly powerful and in some cases eye opening. It has been our experience that it is only when there is some acknowledgement of ‘the truth’; that there are many periods of the day when individuals are bored, isolated or frustrated, that we can start to put in place some ideas for making things better.

Observations can also highlight the things that are going really well.

Energise and motivate the team with some practical training

While facing the truth is important, we also do a lot of interactive exercises which give staff a chance to experience things for themselves.

Giving staff some fun during the morning with finding conversation starters, listening to different types of music, being playful and silly, reading from books and looking at pictures all set the scene well for trying new things out with people living in the home.

Go directly from the training out into lounges and try out some different approaches

If you have just spent some time in the training talking about improving the mealtime experience, then it makes sense to go directly into lunchtime to try out some new ideas.

In a recent training, for example, care workers all took an object, a large laminated picture and some conversation starter cards to the table with them to try out in the dining room. The impact was an immediate buzz about the place, which everyone noticed and enjoyed. One woman living with a dementia commented with a smile: “What’s different today? Everyone seems to be smiling more!”. A man who was normally very reserved came to life talking about his trout fishing experiences having been shown a picture of some fishermen. It was a Friday so there was fish on the menu.

Debriefing the experience with the manager and the team is key

One good experience obviously doesn't mean that this is going to happen every day. The team need an opportunity to reflect on what they have been doing and to learn from this.

Conversation starter cards, for example, are all question based, and time is taken to talk about the challenges of too many questions for people living with a dementia. Ideas for starting conversations without a direct question are then shared; a care worker said that she found it helpful to talk about her dog, which then prompted happy memories from one woman who was a great dog lover.

Managers need to ask open questions from the staff about how they have found the experience, whether they have learnt something new about anyone and whether there are things that they could do the same or differently tomorrow or on a regular basis. The manager then can also maintain the momentum by noticing and praising those who do follow up the ideas the next day and beyond.

While all of these elements may seem very simple and obvious, it is rare to find care settings which are doing this kind of structured yet informal, practice development. It does, of course, need leaders or trainers who are prepared to get out and about in the home and roll their sleeves up. This is not without its risks as I have sometimes found myself thinking on my feet with ways to engage individuals whose life stories I know very little about as a visitor for a ‘one off’ coaching day. However, giving focused time and attention to people usually reaps magical rewards, as you see wellbeing levels increase and the mood of a room transformed.

These approaches combine training, coaching and leadership tools in a very practical way to help staff develop in both skills and confidence.

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