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Probation Practice, Leadership and Effective Service Delivery: A Qualitative Study of the Perspectives of Probation Officers and Service Managers in the New Zealand Probation Service

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The primary goal of this thesis is to consider probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery in the New Zealand Community Probation Service during a period of major change.

In relation to this goal, the objectives are: (a) to explore Probation Officers' and Service Managers' understandings of the political and managerial changes affecting the New Zealand Probation Service; (b) to ascertain Probation Officers' and Service Managers' views of probation values, knowledge, skills and practice; (c) to understand Probation Officers' and Service Managers' views of the assessment of service delivery; (d) to identify how Probation Officers and Service Managers define and what they understand by the concepts of leadership and effective service delivery; (e) to examine how the relationship between leadership and effective service delivery is perceived and acted upon by Probation Officers and Service Managers; and (f) to determine the structures and processes that are necessary to maximise the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery.

The research participants comprised a purposeful sample of 27 Probation Officers and 8 Service Managers (front-line staff involved in service delivery) recruited from among those employed in the northern and southern administrative regions of the Probation Service. Qualitative data were collected via personal in-depth interviews and augmented by focus group discussions.

The key findings of the study are that:

- first, effective service delivery was not perceived to be limited to the reduction of recidivism alone, but to also include the client's broader social experience,
recognising that positive social benefit can extend beyond the simple measurement of offending behaviour.

- second, leaders must be seen to be credible if they are to create willing followers. This credibility rested upon the leader’s possession of relevant practice knowledge and skills, their demonstrated commitment to professional practice, their ability to provide clear direction for practice and their ability to ensure that adequate resources are available to achieve service delivery goals;

- third, a positive association was drawn between a leader’s professional experience, possession of personal power and ability to influence Probation Officer practice. In essence, the leader’s experience and competence has a bearing upon confidence in the leader. Participants also posited a connection between positive leadership, the development of a ‘team’ culture, Probation Officer work performance and service delivery.

Overall, the linkage between leadership and effective service delivery was conceived of as being dependent upon the ability of leaders to enhance the practice of Probation Officers. From this perspective, five leadership challenges for senior managers in the Probation Service were identified. These included the challenges to: (a) establish the professional foundations of probation practice; (b) develop a clearer, integrated statement of purpose, values and beliefs that identifies probation as a distinct area of professional practice; (c) develop probation practice in a flexible manner, incorporating international influences while remaining responsive to features and events that reflect the dynamic character of the local environment; (d) to ensure that the integrative structures, processes and new roles/positions necessary to underpin and support probation practice are introduced or implemented, notably for the provision of professional supervision; and (e) to introduce a multi-dimensional approach to the assessment of service delivery that includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators of aspects other than recidivism alone. It is acknowledged that these challenges have significant resource implications.
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