

Catering for blokes as folks with disabilities within Men's Sheds

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Mark is the Men's Shed Representative for Churches of Christ in Queensland (CofCQ). His role involves assisting the commencement and coaching support for community men's sheds throughout QLD where CofCQ Care services and churches are located. CofCQ associated sheds are all encouraged to become individual members of the Australian Men's Shed Association.

From its beginning, Nambour Men's Shed (auspiced and empowered by Churches of Christ <http://www.cofcqld.com.au> in Queensland in partnership with Interact Australia www.interactaustralia.com.au has aimed to be an inclusive community men's shed, particularly including blokes with intellectual and physical disabilities.

Now after three years of operation, we certainly suggest that we have learnt a lot of how not to do it in our quest to understand what best works. At times, it has been a difficult road to travel, but the outcome has proved invaluable, enabling the lives of all participants to be enriched, as per the main objective of men's sheds.

To better cater for blokes with disabilities without deterring other guys from coming, guys who did not have the patience for blokes with disabilities, involved overcoming incorrect ideals that some disability service groups and carer's perceived men's sheds should be. To do this, we realised that we first needed to formulate our own men's shed philosophy so that we could have a term of reference to work from, a mainframe concept that could manage and cater for many differing needs. We also identified that the philosophy needed to be crystal clear and easy to articulate.

The following statements are what we now have printed within our Nambour Men's Shed's information brochure:

It seems to us that there are 'too' many people who think that men's sheds are workshop type places where older men, with too much time on their hands, go to tinker and use up their spare time. This pamphlet is our opportunity to set the record straight, explaining why we think the Nambour Men's Shed (NMS) has become the 'BIG EXCUSE' for many blokes, for all the right reasons.

Obviously, given the phenomenal growth of men's sheds throughout our Nation (1000+), something significantly important is meeting the needs of men

within our communities and it mostly has to do with mateship. So much in fact, irrespective of whatever, NMS considers everything that happens within a men's shed simply as excuses for guys to socialise.

Men generally find it easier to socialise within a work place environment, hence the reason why many men often find themselves at a loss during retirement or without employment. With this in mind, NMS has intentionally developed a man-friendly work-place-type environment, an environment which simple enables men to enjoy the company of other men.

Predominately, many of our members are retired with extraordinary skills and interests which give reason to why the NMS workshop is resourced with high quality tools, tools that many of the blokes have been well accustomed to using for many years, but NMS also caters for many more interests, including administrative interests, rather than just interests related to workshops.

As mentioned, everything that happens within NMS is simply an excuse for men to enjoy socialisation and this is the very reason why NMS has such things as a music band, known as 'ShedJam'. If there is an interest that can produce simple social interaction, NMS is keen to cater for it.

Then again, maybe all a bloke wants is simply a place to escape to just to catch up with mates, have a good laugh and drink too many cups of coffee which is completely AOK. In fact, if the most a bloke can do is to generate a conversation with another bloke who needs a friend, that bloke becomes one of the most important contributors of the NMS.

As far as projects go, blokes are welcome to work on their own personal projects, participate within a project to assist some not-for-profit community organisation or a NMS fundraising project. There is no expectation however, for anyone to participate in either.

We consider our yearly membership and daily or weekly fees simply as donations, token gestures to assist NMS's community mission of 'Men building community in a shed', in response to supporting men's health. As expected, it costs much more than yearly and attendance fees to sustain NMS and this is the very reason why NMS depends on community support for donations, (resources and financial) and sponsorships.

Our main approach, working with blokes with disabilities, is to not refer to them any differently than anyone else within the Men's Shed, particularly within the area of independence, which we regard as an essential ingredient of maintaining community within the men's shed. We have learnt that anything that becomes taxing upon any one else within

the shed, hindering what they have come to the men's shed for, simply does not work.

For example, if a bloke with dementia comes to the shed, with restricted capabilities, with an expectation that someone within the shed is going to help them with a project, those who feel obligated to help and leave their own projects to assist eventually become resentful.

To deal with incorrect expectations, we have formed a policy that clearly details that if anyone comes to the men's shed needing help or specific care, unless someone within the shed willingly wishes to assist, that person must be accompanied by an appropriate assistant or carer otherwise the most they can become involved within is a conversation with others. With the assistance of an appropriate assistant or carer, each and every participant becomes independent and community happens.

Larger groups associated with a disability service may also be requested to have an appropriate project manager accompany the group, as well as, sufficient carers to ensure the group's projects and supervision are correctly catered for.

As I would expect to be the case within all men's sheds, only competent inducted people will be authorised to operate workshop machinery. So attaining appropriate project managers and assistants is imperative before machinery can be used.

The other difficult issue that simply needs common sense to overcome, is setting specific times for different needs and interests to assist the shed to operate more smoothly. Obviously, workshop activities is a major issue when our music group meets, so common sense says, we simply need specific times just for that activity.

Working through the issue of blokes not having patience for blokes with disabilities also requires a similar type approach. To think everyone is going to get along with everyone, all the time, is simply too idealistic and dangerous. In short, if men stop coming to the men's shed because of their inability to appreciate the differences associated with blokes with disabilities, we are in danger of losing the main core of what underpins

why a men's shed exists. So the aim is, to be as inclusive as much as we are able and to sensitively managing the differing needs as needed

We have learnt that setting specific times asides for different needs enables shed blokes to work around the times that don't best suit them. Once again, I simply consider this as common sense prevailing.

Many blokes, however, do not have any trouble with folks with disabilities and happily go about their shed workshop and social activities as normal irrespective of who may or may not be there.

All in all, we now operate much more smoothly these days, catering for many different interests and needs, with a much clearer operational understanding for all who participate within the Nambour Men's Shed.

For us, this inclusive understanding is a major breakthrough that naturally maintains, promotes and protects the community environment of what it means to be a healthy men's shed. It is an understanding that we are now implementing within each of our other associated Queensland Men's Sheds.

[Photos by Mark Ward 08-2014 'These two are very special fellas that epitomize what men's sheds are all about. Unfortunately, the younger disabled fella passed away and his parents gave me permission to use the photo. An honour indeed.']



