

Men Behaving Gladly

Notes describing Mens Sheds in Tasmania

MARTIN PRICE

mprice@engagementworks.com

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- Some observations of Men's Sheds in Tasmania

Martin Price April 2017

Introduction

Since the timely arrival of this social initiative in Australia in the 1990s, Men's Sheds have multiplied as the result of local community initiatives. It must be said that there is a long-standing tradition in Australia of older men who meet informally to tinker, enjoy conversation and make things together.

The idea has caught the attention and imagination of many people in the English-speaking world and elsewhere. Interestingly, the formation of these havens of older men, run by older men, are not the result of concerted regional or national campaigns. Rather, their formation is down to start-ups that have been locally undertaken and led by those who I have termed 'local heroes'.

The growth of Men's Sheds can be seen as part of society's determination to improve the quality of community life.

In comparison with other national voluntary organisations (e.g. Rotary, Boy Scouts, Round Table, RSL, RVS, Age UK, U3A), every Men's Shed is noticeably different from any other. Nevertheless, their goals, conduct and the choices that they make are all in pursuit of the health and wellbeing of its members - the movement's primary purpose. Men's Sheds associations have nevertheless proved to be challenging and even problematic in both Britain and Australia.

These notes report the strong support for Men's Sheds coming from local communities, municipalities and businesses throughout Tasmania and describe how this has enabled remarkable growth and success. More Men's Sheds are found across the Tasmania's population (of 500,000) than anywhere else. But even here, with a total of approximately 2,500 members, a large number of older men for whom Shed membership would be appropriate, have yet to be reached. If Men's Sheds (and their evolution as a 'community' sheds) are important to society, then it follows that they should be distributed more widely.

These notes argue for a more concerted approach and plan in Tasmania and in Britain. A case is made to further empower and augment the efforts of local heroes. This requires greater community engagement, collaboration and funding, all driven by a strong vision and resolve by Sheddors to make it happen. The mission is recognised to be both worthy and formidable.

The author

Martin Price was first introduced to Men's Sheds in Tasmania in 2015. He joined the Milton Keynes Shed in Britain in that year and in 2016 was a founder member (and now Chair) of Northampton Men's Sheds. He has been a regular visitor to Tasmania over the last 25 years where, during a recent extended stay, he visited a number of Sheds and learned from them about their operation, organisation and the choices that they have made. Before his retirement Martin advised on the development of organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors in Britain and elsewhere. His notes here do not claim to be comprehensive and they are expressed in narrative only because of

the variability of Shed's features and activities and the difficulty of identifying Sheds' features that are comparable.

During the recent visit, Martin met with Shedders at

1. Longford Shed (Tasmania)
2. Channel Shed (Tasmania)
3. Port Sorrell Shed (Tasmania)
4. Ulverstone Shed (Tasmania)
5. Portland Shed (Victoria)
6. Horsham Shed (Victoria)
7. Lakeside Shed (South Australia)
8. Victor Harbour Shed (South Australia)

My thanks go to the Shedders who I met and for their contributions to these notes. These are not the product of a survey but they do raise some issues that may be useful to anyone involved in the operation or development of Men's Sheds. They provide an overview and some observations relating to the purposes, conduct and the choices that are made in the operation and development of Men's Sheds in Tasmania. The notes address both my observations and my own views regarding the human and organisational aspects of Men's Sheds.

The notes were prepared primarily for the interest of Shedders in Britain.

A Some observations of Men's Sheds in Tasmania

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A Some observations of Men's Sheds in Tasmania

1. A Shed and its intentions – The Twin Purpose



Most Shedders have in their past been accustomed to the demands and constraints of a work organisation and its requirement to deliver.

This is the purpose of a place dedicated to producing required outcomes. However, while these features are frequently a part of the Men's Shed experience, they are not its purpose.

Led and organised effectively, Men's Sheds bring companionship, learning and satisfaction to Shedders as they work together 'shoulder to shoulder'. This is the primary purpose. It is about "having fun, making stuff, fixing stuff, talking about stuff, or doing nothing, together." (A quote from 'The Men's Shed Movement' by Barry Golding)

There is however another dimension to all this. In pursuit of its primary purpose, Men's Sheds in Tasmania are also becoming recognised as contributing to other needs of their local community. Examples of this include mentoring arrangements for local young men, making classroom furniture and other community projects. Another example is the design and making of a presentation cabinet for the original 1832 clockwork bell-ringing mechanism for Christ Church in Longford. As a further example, in March of this year a Shed in Tasmania was delighted to be able to pass on to a young single mother a refurbished motorcar donated by a community supporter.



By functioning within the community in this way, a Shed becomes recognised to be in pursuit a wider mission. Here a Shed concerns itself with the health and wellbeing of the local community as well as the health and wellbeing of the Shedders. This broader purpose is becoming adopted in Tasmania but it is one that is not formally declared. This more socially inclusive portrayal of Men's Sheds can be regarded as less introspective, centering more on the common good. It is referred in these notes as The Twin Purpose.

2. Shed leaders

These are the Shedders who cause things to happen and show the way for others to follow their example. Every Shed depends on its local volunteer heroes and without them a Shed cannot not be created, developed or sustained. The very heavy reliance placed today on these

key players, as a Shed's principal leaders, is a significant risk to any Sheds' continuity and survival.

Few, if any Shed leaders have been able to rely only on their Shed experience to acquire the ability to initiate events and influence people in their Shed. The capability of any able 'Shedboss' in reality develops the skills needed earlier in their career. And for anyone to be able to lead the Shed functions of planning, co-ordinating activities, funding/finance, promotion or the administration of a Shed, a further steep learning curve has to be followed. It is suggested that a programme to support development of Shed leaders should include the following elements

- Meeting the social needs of older men and the Twin Purpose* of Men's Sheds *see Section A1
- How a Shed in run: relationships, functions and roles.
- Personal Development
- Sales, funding and services provided by the Association.

Leading the work of Sheddors brings its own challenges. Few Sheddors enjoy being told what to do or how it is to be done. Collaboration has to be conducted with care and sensitivity.



Many otherwise worthy enterprises have withered on the vine for want of a succeeding generation of able and experienced leaders willing and able to accept the baton.

The issue of succession can be acute for voluntary organisations, especially if the duration of appointments are short, as tends to be the case in Men's Sheds. Sheds are likely to need the support of their Association in developing programmes to enable the development of leadership and its succession. Many Sheddors expressed concern on this matter.

3. The conduct of a Shed community – **'The Shedder's Way'**

Instead of following prescribed processes and structures, Sheds enjoy their autonomy; with activities determined from choices made by the volunteer Sheddors themselves, Opportunities to work on projects are open and Sheddors are free to proceed with their own, subject to the workshop's policies and the advice of a co-ordinator or steward.

For the organisation to maintain its purpose, preserve order and to work 'Shoulder to Shoulder', Sheddors need to engage together through their Shed's particular patterns of behaviour and working practices. This form of regime will no doubt contrast with a Shedder's prior experience of 'normal' working arrangements experienced earlier

in their career, when activities were conducted through a controlling hierarchy.

For a Shed to encourage companionship, steer its projects, bring in revenue, promote health, build partnership and secure finance, success depends on the Shedder's particular ways of connecting with one another. In Tasmania, I sensed that this capability could be termed 'The Shedd's Way'. Below I list some of the behaviour and working practices reckoned in Tasmania to be important for sustaining The Shedd's Way.

- **Sharing what we do – *collegiality***
Shedders get to know one-another best when sharing project work, problem solving and other joint pursuits. Collegiality occurs naturally as people engage in conversation, work as part of a team and in other ways collaborate. Shed leaders should seek to limit the number of Shedders working as individual contributors. There is less shoulder-to-shoulder there! Shedders should seek to share project working.
- **Shedders joining in – *becoming community members***
Shedders will encounter one-another for the first time and forming their first impressions. In many cases this leads to informal and easy social engagement that can then lead to close, robust and useful relationships. However some people find this process more difficult to follow than others. As many Sheds have demonstrated in Tasmania, a lot can be done to help newcomers to find engagement and companionship.

In some Sheds in Tasmania, as part of an induction programme, Shed leaders welcome new arrivals at a tea, lunch-break or other forum. A strong 'kick-off', as the foundation to enabling an enduring membership, can be achieved in this way. Here a Shed leader can conduct a short introduction that prompts questions through which other Shedders can gain an appreciation of a newcomer's background, as it is their choice to reveal it.

- **The Shed as a Partnership – *sharing responsibility***
When a new Shed is formed and its first members have accepted a constitution, ideas will need to be explored and decisions made by its committee. Progress will subsequently depend on the Shedders' involvement in discussions about the ways that the Shed is to be run, organised and planned. It is also important for Shedders as members, to have the opportunity for dialogue: raising issues and having their say.



Whatever forum is decided upon for members to meet together, this can also bring useful opportunities for:

1. sharing and testing new ideas through dialogue
2. deciding joint working arrangements
3. resolving and agreeing priorities and other issues of concern
4. developing leaders at every level. A forum is a place where ideas can be explored. Shedders have their say where they will be recognised for it.
5. showing appreciation and recognition for the contributions of individual Shedders
6. celebrating achievement
7. endorsing a Shed's values, style and identity
8. cultivating the Shed's sense of community.

It is here where the Shed's heart can be heard to beat. In the Sheds that I visited the forum, as described above, sometimes found its place at a tea or lunch break. Those conducting a forum recognised the vital importance of these events and for their regularity. They also recognised that facilitation skills are needed.

Whatever structure a forum takes, these events need to be recognised as crucial to the health, wellbeing and future of the Shed. The meetings need the attention of most if not all members. Much of the style and progress of a Shed arises from the judgements that Shed leaders make in influencing the scope of the agenda and in orchestrating productive argument.

- Actions 'without approval' – ***shedders making their own arrangements***

Men's Sheds is a voluntary organisation where both planning and day-to-day decisions are seen to be subject to the preferences of members. Sheds are self-determining and in Tasmania I found that Shedders expect one another to always act in the common good.



I found that while policy and plans are primarily determined and led by the committee, initiatives are also taken by other formations that Sheddors might devise. I found that Sheddors sometimes prefer to assume their own authentic intent.

When I came across this practice of 'getting on with it without the limitations of formalities', I was reminded of the 'Skunk Works' that are sometimes created inside US defence contractor organisations as a means of concentrating professional resolve and energy. They are devised to create an apparently separate and deviant organisation in which local enterprise and innovation is nurtured and protected, away from the business's mainstream activities.



I sensed that the motives for these 'actions without authority' in Men's Sheds are born of enthusiast's desire to avoid frustrating delays, but it also offers some re-assurance of the resilience and energy of a Shed's enterprise.

- **The bundling of project tasks – joint working in teams**
The idea and need for a Shed project can arise from many directions. Whenever possible in promoting 'Shoulder to Shoulder', the work should be undertaken and owned by a group of Sheddors rather than be conducted by a Shedder as the single contributor.

4. Fund-raising, donations and revenue from sales

Every Shed devises its own financial arrangements. While funds are acquired as donations from institutional bodies (from federal, state, government, private and charitable sources), assets are also acquired through gifts in kind. Considerable effort is continually invested in securing and recognising grants and other donations.



A notable example of this was the construction of the Channel Shed in Margate near Hobart the State capital.

This was carefully planned and put in place before the Shedder's first meeting and has a size of over 6,000 sq-ft. The shed's frame, concrete base, cladding, internal fitting-out and utilities were all donated including the labour required. Tasmanian commercial companies donated all this without cost to the Shed.

There is strong conviction in Tasmania that Sheds, besides securing grants and donations (largely for capital spend), should be feeding their current account from revenue earned through the sale of goods and

services. Besides the matter of a Shed's income, there are the Shedd's need to feel pride and dignity acquired from some self-sufficiency. Some Sheds build school furniture and other fittings for government owned properties. Many design and make tourist souvenir items and children's toys.

I did however come across instances where volume production of items involving what was seen to be tedious repetition - a move away from the primary purpose of Men's Sheds. Perhaps the business habits of some Shedd's can lead to working practices that place sharing, collaboration and interest as a low priority.

The view was also expressed to me that while Sheds should engage in trading, they should not place themselves in unfair competition with local businesses having labour costs, in a way that would undercut their bid.

To build Shed projects, local businesses sell materials and other products, frequently at a discount. But Shedd's are past masters at procurement. Donations in kind are common as is the recycling or materials obtained from the local refuse department or 'tip.' Ingenuity plays a large part and completed projects are often dispatched when made entirely from recycled material. In this way, material costs are lowered, the price of goods and services to community customers are reduced and a Shed's income improved.

5. Collaboration between Sheds and the use of media.

The level of collaboration between Sheds is less than I expected. I was slow to realise that the launch of a Shed in Tasmania is driven essentially by the resolve and skill of local heroes. The sense of identity felt by Shedd's is derived from their local situation rather than the movement's collective interests and opportunities. In these pioneering years of Men's Sheds, many leaders develop into their role by learning more from their own discovery than from learning from the experience of other Sheds. (An exception to this is the sharing of documented procedures from AMSA, TMSA and other sources including those published by Lane Cove Community Men's Shed)

Through their enterprise, local people invent, organise and launch their own unique Shed. The organisation of a Shed and its formation is nowhere prescribed. Establishing and running a Shed takes great skill and persistence and it is through local effort and its progress that a Shed's own distinctive identity, ethos, goals and sense of independence is developed.

Every Shed is very different and this characteristic of the movement can constrain assistance that might be offered externally. Shedd's awareness of other Sheds on the island and the opportunities to learn from them is under-developed. More could be learned from the experiences of a Shed's neighbours and from wider and deeper association. Learning and collaborating as a community would enable more possibilities and progress that is jointly sponsored.

Few Sheds publish a website and while other voluntary organisations publish popular and widely circulated Newsletters, Bulletins and Journals, these have not developed in Men's Sheds, so far as I am aware. A popular monthly Journal could serve to report the development of new ideas, project trials and tribulations.

Features could report community projects and their impact, the development of workshops and new types of activities, attracting donations, health initiatives and the work of Sheds in other parts of the world. Shedders could contribute through a correspondence column. Financing through advertising should be considered.

6. Patterns of Shed development

Issues:

- **A Shed Building and the Strategy for its Growth**

Shed buildings typically emerge from small beginnings. Growth of the facility is then often undertaken in successive stages over time. The result can be a building having an awkward layout. Alternatively, a more useful layout and structure can be acquired from building a Shed as a one-off project where a design can be formulated and delivered.

- **A Council Partnership**

Partnership with a local council can be a collaborative arrangement in the form of a 'Community Shed'. It is also a vehicle to extend the purpose of Men's Sheds to play a leading part in a local community and its development.

- **The Urban Question**

A Shed (or Sheds) opening in a conurbation may not be readily identifiable as a discrete local identity or by name; the locality being essentially urban and otherwise amorphous. A new Shed may be or is to become one of several Sheds in a locality. Local heroes might be deployed in some way across such a network of Sheds (rather than being dedicated to particular Sheds) and they may share some common goals.

- **Interests and skills**

Woodwork of all kinds is the most popular interest in Men's



Sheds but many others are followed such as artwork, metalwork and singing.

Finding and supporting Shedders with specialist ability in a particular interest is important. Careful choices also need to be made to develop and to ensure the competence of Shedders.

Other interests include the design and development of CNC machines and at Longford Shed, the refurbishment and re-selling of portable power units.

At Port Sorrell 'Billy Carts' are being built for a local school for events that bring together teachers, parents and children. In Britain building drones, electric cars and prototype printing are also examples; demonstrating the diversity of interests that are possible.

- **Commercial or government patronage of Men's Sheds**
Contracting with a national or international conglomerate to fund the opening of new sheds. There are no known examples of this arrangement.
- **Volunteers as the Shed leaders – a big ask**
These notes perhaps signal the need to review the ways in which Sheds are run and to consider changing ways of governance. A Shed's committee members and other Shed leaders have in most cases a formidable agenda (as indicated by the Critical Success Factors that relate to human and organisational matters listed under 'B'). It raises the question: 'Can Men's Sheds expect to thrive without more reliance on central support? Other national voluntary organisations (e.g. Rotary, Boy Scouts, Round Table, RSL, RVS, Age UK, U3A) all provide their front line units with some form of central support.

7. Training, Insurance and Safety Management

I discovered these to be subjects of concern in some Sheds. There are perhaps three issues here:

- A. The need for Sheddors to feel themselves working in a place that is always made to be safe and where skills can be acquired.
- B. The limitations of safety management systems when some Sheddors are insufficiently competent in the use of tools (hand and power).
- C. Establishing a compliance regime of rules and guidance in a voluntary setting is problematic. Insurance companies must recognise this, making their risk assessment more problematic.

One of the Sheds that I visited was established as part of a Community Shed in a local council's organisation. The Shed was included in the council's safety management system and their insurance policy. In this arrangement, a number of Sheddors played the part of 'Supervisors'.

These are each assigned to particular machines/processes and are expected to ensure that only trained Sheddors have access and work safely. This regime was the responsibility of the council's safety engineer. This arrangement relies on the formality of council's professional management while operated by the Sheddors themselves.

B Critical Success Factors – Human and Organisational

1. A committee that is able and responsive
2. Attention to men's health and wellbeing
3. Leadership that is inspiring and always present
4. Safe working
5. Shedders as partners
6. Active local community involvement
7. Liaison with neighbouring Sheds
8. Enrolling new members and leaders
9. Limiting a Shed's membership (to below 40?)
10. High attendance and shed utilisation
11. Regular social events
12. Shedders' collaboration
13. Sharing project work
14. Effective day-to-day stewarding
15. Sharing craft and technical skills
16. Choosing activities, their facilities and stewardship
17. Pursuing The Twin Purpose
18. Community support and development
19. Partnering with a local council
20. Leader development that also assures succession

C Ideas for a progressive Men's Sheds movement

- A rolling plan and programme of development that is capably managed and resourced
- Regular national and regional campaigns to raise public awareness of Purpose, Benefits, Organisation and Enrolment
- Leader development programme ensured by regions
- The movement adopting The Twin Purpose
- National and regional events and websites
- A regular popular journal
- A national council of Shed representatives

End