



Potential Threats to the Future of Men's Sheds

At the 6th National Men's Shed Conference held in Newcastle NSW October 2015, AMSA's Community Engagement Officer Gary Green gave a presentation on what we see as the biggest threats to the Men's Shed Movement in the future.

Our thoughts come from more than 16 years of observing and being involved in Sheds at the grass roots and administrative levels and reflect some of the difficult issues that have emerged as the Shed movement has evolved.

The list as we see it but not necessarily in order of importance:

Threat 1 - Loss of ownership and self determination at the local level

Men's Sheds have been highly successful in engaging with older men in our communities and one of the reasons is that the men who go to the Shed feel a sense of ownership about the Shed.

The Shed may officially be under the auspice of another organisation (or they may be independent) but the men 'feel' that it is their Shed and that they collectively determine the direction in which the Shed may go.

Threat 2 - Lack of genuine democratic process within the Shed

The ownership also has its roots in everyone having an equal say on Shed activities and direction.

Exemplary Sheds follow true democratic processes even though this may be achieved in an informal way. If the men are consulted about issues and they feel that they have been listened to and that their opinion is considered then, even if the final decision may not be agreed with, they can usually accept it.

This skill to determine the general feeling amongst shedders is one which the Shed leadership should have or develop.

Threat 3 - Bureaucratisation and Interference

Along the same lines as 1 & 2, bureaucracies and their interference can lead to dissatisfaction in the Shed. This especially becomes a threat when the bureaucracy holds the purse strings either through providing grant monies or through auspicing the Shed.

Bureaucracies should accept that, as much as possible, the Shed should be run by the men for the men.

Threat 4 - Over formalisation/over prescribing

One of the reasons that men find Men's Sheds safe and comfortable environments to be in is that Sheds are generally as informal as they can possibly be while still complying with relevant laws and regulations especially around safety.

Men seem to like informality rather than prescriptive management that may stifle the Sheds ability to adapt to changing shedders and their changing needs.

Keep it simple and remember that the principles behind Men's Sheds are NOT rocket science – as a matter of fact the principles are very simple and generally do not need to be over complicated!

Threat 5 - Service focussed

Men's Sheds are not a service for men but activities organised by men. Mostly Men's Sheds do not provide services to men – they are merely men friendly spaces that men choose to go to.

The focus should be on the men who come and allow them to decide their destiny (and activities) within the Shed.

Threat 6 - Turning sheds into health services/centres

Most Government funding available to Men's Sheds comes from health budgets or because Sheds have a positive health outcomes for those who attend. The big health outcome recognised by all is that Men's Sheds reduce social isolation and this, in turn, means that shedders have a better chance of staying healthy than their non-shed counterparts.

However Sheds should not become Health Centres or Services. Health staff may be invited to attend the Shed by the shedders to educate or screen but this should be at the discretion of the Shed members and not be demanded by the health service.

Threat 7 - Profit focused

Some Sheds can get caught up in chasing the dollars and this can lead to a focus on production outcomes rather than a focus on the outcomes for the men.

Most men in Sheds are retired (or semi retired) and they have actively avoided chasing the mighty dollar and the work load and responsibility that this creates.

They wish to lead a less stressful life. But the shedders also love to help out others within their community – provide them with a meaningful task to do that is helping out someone else or some other group and they will jump at the opportunity to do so while at the same time be helping themselves.

Threat 8 - Non inclusiveness

We at AMSA would like to think that all member Sheds are inclusive of all men no matter what their beliefs or background or preferences.

We encourage Sheds to do the same and not discriminate against those who may be perceived as 'different'!

Threat 9 - Inadequate insurance

Adequate insurance is vital to the ongoing sustainability of Sheds or there is a risk that, following a misadventure, the Shed will be financially disadvantaged and/or close down following a potential court case.

Check your Shed's insurance against the AMSA Group Insurance that is available (designed specifically for Men's Sheds) and make sure that you are comparing apples with apples

Threat 10 - Accidents and injuries

"Your shed is only one accident away from being closed down" (Worksafe Victoria).

Each and every one of us in Sheds has a responsibility to look out for the safety of visitors and all the other shedders around us. If you see something that you feel is unsafe then mention it to the person(s) – don't just wait for the accident to happen or for someone else to do it! Count your fingers when you get to the Shed each morning and follow safe practices so that, when you leave in the afternoon, you have the same number.

Threat 11 - Poor Governance & Compliance

There are so many potential problems within Sheds that do not have Governance and Compliance policies and practices in place.

Constitutions may not be followed, no one making decisions or poor decision making, AGMs that do not follow correct procedure, poor financial management, etc.

AMSA has recommended example documents such as Constitutions, policies and procedures. Make use of them and ensure that all members are aware of them.

Follow the correct procedures in order to avoid further problems down the track.

Threat 12 – Peacocks & Others

You will all recognise the Shed Peacock! He is the one who is more important than anyone else and because he knows better than anyone else- what should be done, how it should be done irrespective of what anyone else thinks!

We have observed this being a problem at Shed, State and National level. The self important peacock classically bullies himself into a position of power within the Shed and then attempts to run the show on his own.

All too often AMSA ends up getting a phone call from this self important peacock and he is puzzled – "I don't understand why the other members are not coming anymore? I have set up the Shed so well for them!". Of course the idea that the 'other blokes' are quite capable of doing it together never enters his head. They have voted with their feet and just left the Shed (maybe for another Shed). The rest of the shedders need to stand up to these bullies and learn to say "NO".

We also include in this category the absolute stickler for dotting 'i's and crossing the 't's that can, at times, detract from the true running of the Shed so that everyone is bogged down in trivialities rather than the things that matter.