Recovery and Organizational Culture:
Is Your Agency Ready to Make a Change?

Your organization's leadership has talked about the importance of recovery and has thought about embedding this into your culture more deeply. You know that culture determines your environment, so step back to reflect on your organization's current culture, and your readiness to move in this direction.

This paper shares conversation starters intended for program leaders to think through existing organizational culture, and what might need to be modified to achieve a more recovery-centric approach.

Start by bringing your team together to talk about the following questions:

→ What is the ongoing mechanism for feedback from service recipients about their satisfaction with their practitioner and the service they are receiving?

→ How do we assure that participant concerns and staff suggestions and satisfaction feedback get to management and the Board of Directors?

→ Who is responsible for staff interviewing and hiring now? How can we find a place to include staff and service participants in the review or interview process?

What you may learn from this discussion: These conversations begin to address the need to be person-centered and help staff start the process of looking to the needs of the service participant as primary, rather than the needs of the staff or the organization. Bringing satisfaction and outcome data to management and the Board elevates the importance of these issues and demonstrates that the information will be acted upon.

Next, delve a little deeper into your organizational culture. Start some conversations about the following:

→ Are your policies - such as affirmative action, drug and alcohol history, or past criminal justice involvement - supportive of people who might have a lived experience of mental illness or substance use, or might have experienced trauma?

→ How would we know if our organization is a safe place for staff to share their own experiences with mental health, substance use and trauma?

→ What has happened in the past when staff have revealed personal challenges? How have they been treated by management?

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→ How flexible are we as an organization? What policies demonstrate our flexibility? Are there opportunities for us to be more flexible in our services, policies, or practices?

What you may learn from this discussion: These essential discussions can begin to illuminate the level of support among organizational management for transforming to a recovery focused, trauma informed culture. Are top organizational leaders willing to embed these approaches into agency policy? Is your organization one where staff feel comfortable revealing their own personal histories of behavioral health challenges? Staff who feel they must hide their own histories of lived experience may have a more difficult time being open about stigma with service participants.

When you are ready, have a frank discussion around these difficult questions. Look for a willingness to shift the way you do business. If management is not ready and willing to change policy, then staff will not be able to be supported in modifying their practice. Try these discussion starters:

→ Have your supervisors been exposed to training in how to help staff use their own experiences with trauma, mental health and substance use to enhance their practice?

→ Do you train, supervise and evaluate staff based on recovery and trauma informed principles and values including the importance of language, the need for culture change and the concrete tools needed to practice in a recovery focused and trauma informed way?

Answering these questions may take you down interesting paths, and should illuminate both your current practices, and your values both as individuals and as an organization. If your answers reveal you are not ready to make a change *easily*, don't give up. Use a psychiatric rehabilitation approach (which measures an individual's readiness to change as a first step) to evaluate where your organization might stand in a transformation process. Then work to foster readiness in areas of need, tapping into your organization's strengths and assets. Remember: if you know where you are and where you want to go everyone can be successful in making a change.

This Supplemental Resource was written by Edye Schwartz, DSW, LCSW-R, as part of the Workforce Priorities *project, ©2020*

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