

Results: Grassroots, Community-Based Service Provider

One-Day Retreat Pathway: “Essential Team-Building Tools”

Sample Group: An urban, community-based organization that provides direct services (substance abuse intervention and HIV/AIDS education) for women and their families.

Challenge: This organization has rapidly evolved since its 1999 start-up in a neighborhood garage, to a staff of seven paid employees (and a host of volunteers), with a federal, state and locally funded budget exceeding \$700k, serving >500 clients/year, and transitional and congregant housing under development in two sites. Direction and leadership has been spearheaded by the executive director, with support of dedicated individuals who are extraordinarily committed to each other and passionate about serving the community. Recognizing a need to shift to a more collaborative organization structure to maintain current programs and enable future growth, the team wants assistance to develop and integrate practices that will foster shared leadership and to utilize the fullness of individual talents, capacities and resources the organization is attracting.

Activities: Check-In, Reflective Listening, Identifying a Seed Pattern, and Appreciating One Another

Summary Results: The day was facilitated to create a safe space in which staff could communicate openly and build trust for deeper exploration of challenges that individuals and the organization have been encountering in how they work together. The activities and discussion provided a meaningful experience of sharing leadership, and a valuable opportunity for each person to contribute more fully. The group resolved to “continue the open communication process started here,” and recommitted to strategizing and functioning as a team.

People: Participants were invited and encouraged to share and make suggestions for the team’s success, using “Check-In” to make sure that every voice was included. After hearing from one another throughout the day, everyone shared (with emotion) a quality they value most about each person. One participant summarized the results at the end of the day: “There is a lot more potential here than we have realized.”

Process: The group has a rich history of meeting deadlines and succeeding together under pressure. Everyone works extremely hard to meet each client with compassion and relevant care, in what they describe as a high speed, chaotic environment that is in constant flux, with high turnover. Staff voiced concerns about boundaries and burn-out, and discussed options to provide mutual support. The executive director needs to spend more time in the field, cultivating relationships with important partners and keeping the organization on the cutting edge. Other staff need to “stay in the now” in tune with clients. The process tools used in the workshop permitted everyone to think together about what is needed to build trust that will permit shared leadership. By day’s end the group established next steps to reduce chaos, and to integrate collaborative process tools within day-to-day operations.

Product: The group was reinvigorated in an expanded sense of the organization’s assets and what it has to offer through the full participation of each person on the staff. One staff member described this as “an awesome awakening,” and another added, “it’s a relief.” As the organization moves forward, it will do so more as a team, taking individual responsibility to implement plans and realize visions they articulate together. The group will also revisit roles and functions, to be sure that each person’s gifts are maximized for the greater good.

What new insights were gained?

- Even on my busiest days I have to take in other people's feelings and listen and pay attention when somebody's talking.
- Despite what our perception is, this environment revealed to me we are more unified than it appears in the office.
- It's okay to say how you feel instead of being fearful of what the outcome is going to be. Saying how you feel is important.
- Allowing myself to relax and possibly let things happen to see where we go, the outcome is always great. So I want more to let things happen and trust that.
- We also worry about each individual feeling... our feelings towards the working environment and our feelings towards each other. We were learning about one another today.
- Now I can see inside everybody and hear the part that isn't professional. I see their personal side and it's pleasant. I thank you for that.
- We are opening up a lot more of the basis of the wow! We're trying to get clearer about how to do it together, and from here we can see that the vision we have as a collective group is going to take us far!
- The more you know about a person, about each other, the more you can understand each other. That's really important because when we don't understand each other, there's a lot of confusion.
- It has reinforced what I believed for several months that this team is all committed to the cause as much as [the E.D.] and the rest of us. We're going to do great things. I'm scared to death but let's do it, let's go. There's nobody stopping us but us. We're the only ones stopping us.

How well do I feel we worked together on these activities?

- Extremely well. No one was upset or overriding each other.
- We respected each other and each other's thoughts and feelings.
- We worked as a team, collaboratively and patiently.
- More reflective listening.
- More openness, nobody got defensive, everybody listened to each other.
- There was some real genuineness in what happened today.
- We were very sincere.

What did these activities teach me? In what ways am I improving as I participate in the group?

- ... Everybody likes me!
- These activities taught me that I can have the confidence to go to each and every single person and ask for help or with any problem that arises.
- I'm improving in my faith that things are possible. We can do it. There's nothing we can't do. We came this far... I'm shocked; we're a full-fledged organization. It's amazing.
- The possibilities are endless.
- It reinforced the confidence.
- All the activities put together made me think a lot and what it boils down to is us. The way we communicate and what we feel for one another These activities are bringing us closer. The dynamic of the activity got us to communicating better as us.
- It taught me about relationships and where I hold people. Sometimes I'm so wrapped up in my day-to-day trying to get things done that I miss the connection with people. I need to get back to that place of acknowledging people. I just get wrapped up... I'd like to get back to that relationship piece. Everybody here has been a major contributor to me, and to the agency.
- I see we're all on the same page; we just didn't have the road map so that everybody can utilize their own specific strengths. Everybody compliments each other; we just got to put it together.

Do I sense we are making significant forward progress and if so, in what areas?

- Yes, with a capital Y!
- This is the starting point for real progress; we have to take this and start taking our steps together; now we'll take them more together.
- There's no sense of isolation; there's collective cohesiveness. This is the launching pad.
- This serves as an example of who we are.
- We identified the DNA of our organization without force or false pretense.
- We leave here today with a sense of respect and a level of appreciation for everything that people bring to the table.
- We're re-energizing, restructuring. I'm seeing a reorganization process in my mind.
- It's a great opportunity to go on...
- Nothing happens by chance and God knew that this was the time and space that we needed this moment. We needed this. We couldn't have gone another week without this. For you as an ED to recognize that this is what we need...
- This is something that brings a balance. This is rewarding, empowering, and it was needed.
- We never have a chance to sit down together even in staff development meetings. Now we see that we have to.
- It's good for our mental health.
- It's good for us men; she let us out of the doghouse. The women have only gone out on retreats. Now we're all in this together and there's no stopping us together.