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Key Initial Decisions Community Agencies Need To Make If They Are To Individualize Supports

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Introduction

Though many community service providing agencies are fond of describing themselves as being “person centered”, it is hard to always know what precisely is being meant by such claims. This is particularly true when one notes that these agencies do not systematically offer their service users individualized options of support. Obviously, for some agencies, “person centered” must mean something other than creating authentically individualized services, at least at a minimum. At the same time, it is also true that many well meaning community service providing agencies may very much want to be able to offer their service users increasingly individualized support options and lifestyles, but may lack an organized theory or approach to achieving this.

In this respect, they are more certain of the goal of becoming “person centered” than they are concerning the means for achieving it. Consequently, it may be helpful for such organizations to have a set of key decisions recommended to them that will help them start a process of systematic individualization of service options for their service users. What follows here are a set of recommendations that can serve as a guide to such community agencies for such a redevelopment of services effort in the direction of systematic individualization of supports. They are offered as food for thought rather than as an inviolable check list.

1) Setting The Goal As An Official Agency Priority

It is not likely that a process as significant as the intended systematic individualization of services could proceed in an organization without some form of official placement of it as both an official organizational goal and priority. Getting to such a level of authorization is unlikely unless there has been sufficient consensus obtained amongst the various constituencies of an organization. While a degree of progress short of systematic individualization is possible without a consensus, it would clearly be a much lesser version of individualization. Similarly, having the goal of individualization, but not having it be a priority, might well signal its optional nature, thereby delaying its implementation until other priorities are achieved.

2) Cease Expanding Group/Fixed Models Of Service As Of A Given Date

It is counterproductive to continue to expand group or fixed models of service if the aim is to generate more individual options. The reason for this is that such group models of service are essentially contrary to individualized services in that they are based on groups rather than built as “one person at a time” arrangements of support. Consequently, expanding their proportions as a total of agency offerings will take the agency in precisely the opposite

direction it intends. It will also act to divert resources from individualized options thereby undercutting such efforts. On the other hand, by freezing the expansion of group models it sets the stage for converting such configuration into individualized ones. The precise pace of such transformations from group to individual support arrangements will vary depending upon many factors, but it can be assumed that a measure of perseverance will gradually yield increasing numbers of individualized support options as a percentage of total agency offerings.

3) Assign Key Organizational Leadership Responsibility

Whenever there are goals set and no one assigned to follow through on them, then there is always a risk that uncertainty about leadership will weaken performance on those goals. If there are not key staff and board members specifically authorized to lead an effort at individualization, then there is always the chance that the effort will be leaderless. It takes considerable leadership ability to initiate and sustain forward progress, particularly if the arena at play is an unfamiliar one. Consequently, by carefully selecting the right leadership for the task, it substantially increases the probability of making progress on the individualization agenda. Further, by resolving the question of leadership, it generates greater clarity of roles and responsibilities and makes it easy to hold the leaders accountable for their performance on this dimension of service.

4) Create Specific Organizational Component(s) To Shepherd Individualization

If the effort at individualization does not have a distinct organizational “home”, then the general culture that preceded it could act to hold back progress on the individualization agenda because it is always more difficult to establish a new culture and practice than it is to go along with what is already in place. It is also the case that, by assigning the agenda to its own organizational sphere of authority and leadership, it makes it more likely that those involved can move more quickly in getting the individualization effort underway. There is no great value to be had by assigning individualization responsibilities to the same management system and officials that oversee the current group models as their predilections towards and comfort with group models will tend to dilute the individualization attempted. The scale of the effort at individualization may eventually result in the responsibility for its enactment being assigned to more than one organizational component as the numbers receiving person-by-person support grow as a greater proportion of the people served and overall resources.

5) Not “Backfilling” Group Models

As each person departs a group setting to take on an individualized support arrangement, it will create a “vacancy” in that group model. This action will also temporarily add costs to the organization which now will have to do without that person’s revenue to help offset the overall costs of the group model. This is premised on the assumption that the individual’s funding has moved along with the person to the help pay for the new individualized support arrangement. Under such circumstances, many organizations will be tempted to replace this “lost” revenue by filling this vacancy with another “revenue producing” service user. While this will solve the immediate revenue problem, it only serves to delay the individualization of services process by further reinforcing group models. The temporary burden for the organization is to absorb this added cost while gradually reducing the numbers in the group setting. Once this has been completed, averaged costs should remain equal or less on a comparative basis for the individualized arrangements relative to the group settings unless the individualized arrangements have been made excessively expensive.

6) Make The Components Of Individualized Support Options Negotiable Person-By-Person

The creation of flexible individualized support options designed and implemented solely by the agency may have some individualizing advantages over the agency dominated service design of group settings. Nonetheless, it would seem inconsistent to claim that an individualized arrangement is intended to be “person centered” and then proceed to design it without the person being a key decision-maker in the design of their own individual lifestyle and support options. However, in order to enable such person’s to be designer’s and overseers of their personalized support arrangement, it is extremely useful for them to be advised precisely what service, administrative and financial features the agency has designated as being potentially negotiable. By making these components of individualized service as explicit as possible and by ensuring that service users and their families and networks are confident of their authority to negotiate service design and implementation this sets the stage for their assuming an empowered role. All that then remains will be to establish a clear programmatic process for such negotiations and to assist each person and their network to become as effective as possible in their efforts at negotiating and governing their personalized support options.

7) Evaluate And Improve Upon Previous Agency Attempts At Individualization

In most instances, community agencies will have attempted to offer individualized supports for at least a few of the people they have historically supported. Often, these attempts will have been initial and exploratory in

nature and may well be able to be improved upon in terms of future efforts at individualization. However, such potential learning will have been wasted if there is not a deliberate attempt to retrospectively study what was positive and not-so-positive about previous attempts at individualization. Often, original intentions may have been sound, but are not fully realized in the precise manner in which they were pursued. Apart from it being prudent and conscientious practice to look back and learn, it can also be proactive and preventive if such learning helps generate thoughtful recommendations for improved future practices.

8) Learn From Other Organizations Who Have Been Notably Successful With Individualization

There are many organizations on a worldwide basis that began their efforts at individualization over a generation ago and have gone on to accomplish a great deal by way of the depth and quality of the individual options they have been able to create and evolved over time. They are quite varied in nature and each has valuable insights and advice to share with others that can both save time and accelerate progress and quality if properly followed. Nonetheless, there are always organizations that will overstate their depth, quality and competency and it is important for those seeking guidance to be able to sort out those that are genuinely successful in terms of quality and those who are not. To assess this properly an agency will need to have carefully worked out what it means by quality and individualization and then apply these criteria rigorously.

9) Create Nominal Internal Individualized Funding Accounts For Each Person Supported In Individualized Arrangements

Though many people may mistakenly believe that funding needs to be individualized by the key funders of services, in practice many agencies have found that can set up their own internal individual financial accounts such that each service user is nominally allocated a unique budget based upon their personal needs and the resources available. This process can be largely independent of whatever system of accounts a funder may require, though the information from the individualized internal funding accounts may have to be translated into forms recognizable by the funder. Such individual accounts need not be actual accounts so much as a means by which the individual and their supporters can plan, negotiate and track the details of their personalized supports arrangements. Further, such accounts allow better decisions to be made as to value for money since these accounts are so directly connected to the specifics of how a given person is supported.

10) Engage And Support Service Users To Explore Their Dreams And Potential

Though many people may assume that service users will entirely appreciate their potentials in life and have well developed dreams of what would constitute “the good life” for them, this would certainly not be the case for many individuals. On the contrary, they may well have been schooled or habituated to give up their longings and explorations for a better life, such that they become resigned to an unquestioning compliance with whatever has become the status quo in their life. Whatever the present circumstances of a given person, it is crucial that they be given ongoing support to continue to “imagine better” in their lives so that they can be better positioned to maximize the advantages that can be obtained from using an individualized approach to both support and personal lifestyle. Typically, those persons who are encouraged and supported in this kind of exploration tend to be strengthened in eventually making progress with their dreams and hopes. This is particularly true if the effort is sustained on an ongoing basis.

11) Proactively Reach Out And Partner With Key Funders And External Bureaucracies

Though the record to date with individualization does not indicate that funders or other key regulatory bureaucracies are a permanent obstacle to progress with individualization at a community agency level, they can still be problematic at times if there are not efforts made to educate them as to what is being attempted by a given agency and to seek their cooperation with such efforts. Much of this will revolve around agreement as to goals and purposes and to the agency’s good faith attempts to conform to the funder’s requirements regarding quality, financing and legal obligations. It does not mean that agencies must blindly and uncritically comply with every detail, but rather that they prefer to cooperate wherever possible and to minimize conflicts if feasible. By being proactive, the agency can seize the initiative and make progress in shaping the relationship in constructive terms.

12) Define What Are The Dimensions of Quality In Regards To Individualization

There are many possible dimensions of quality of life that could be relevant to a person’s lifestyle within in community life such as their economic security, their ability to pursue their vital interests in life and their degree of community membership and relationships. It is also true that the quality of supports to the person’s lifestyle can vary in quality and it is important to identify what quality might mean in this regard whether that be the dependability and relevance of service or supports or perhaps the quality of staffing such as their competence, attitudes and ability to relate. It is important to both name what is considered crucial to quality and to pursue and

track this in daily practice if overall results in people's lives are to measure up to all that is hoped for in regards to the "person centered" theme. Normally, the basis of what gets defined as being quality will stem from what core values are enlisted and upheld to support a vision of a good life for the people supported.

13) Select The Right People To Support Quality In Individualization

It is quite unproductive to set challenging goals for quality and individualization and then attempt to meet these by utilizing staff or possibly others who lack insight and commitment to quality. For agencies, staff and key persons in voluntary roles are a principal means by which agency intentions and priorities are translated into practical engagements with the lives of the people they support. Should these persons fail to rise to the challenges involved, then a gap begins to emerge between what the agency had hoped for and what it achieves in practice. Consequently, this underlines the importance of ensuring that the agency places the best possible people into central roles in terms of supporting individuals with their lives. A lack of care and regard in regards to this issue will undoubtedly mean a diminishment in the progress an agency can anticipate with individualization.

14) Ongoing Investments In Values Based Learning And Reflections

Since being congruent in practice with an agency's stated values is crucial to ensuring quality, it is important for community agencies to create many and varied occasions to take stock of whether behavior and values diverge in practice and whether they will need strengthening and better application in the work of the organization. Naturally, given their metaphysical nature, values are not something that one "has" or "has not", but rather they are standards that should challenge as much as they confirm. So, there is merit in revisiting them and stimulating thought, reflection and decision-making on their best application. This is particularly true in regards to values that help people identify with the worth, humanity and potential of the people being supported as their well-being is central to the agency's ostensible and ultimate purposes. When focus begins to drift from these concerns, then it is predictable that other agendas will arise that may not be centered on the well being of the people being served. These potentially competing agendas must be detected and evaluated as to their merit and this is best done frequently and searchingly with ample reference to the highest values of the agency.

15) Start Small And Emphasize Depth And Quality

Though there is an understandable temptation to want to see progress with large numbers of people as quickly as is possible on a goal such as individualization, this intention may presume a greater degree of competency in the agency than may have actually been obtained. In order to be sure, it is

best to bend over backward to ensure that the agency not prematurely move onto expanding individualization to other people when much remains to be done in terms of quality in terms of the small numbers of people who started the process. After all, if the agency is not doing a good job with individualization why go on to disappoint even more people. It is better to get ones foundations of quality well developed so that when replication does occur it involves passing along depth on quality rather than the shallowness and overreaching that typically accompanies well meaning inexperience. This is not an argument to delay growth in individualization indefinitely, but rather to link it directly to actual achievements in quality that can be sustained for the long term.

16) Right From The Beginning Invest In Self Conscious Renewal

People and organizations are subject to all manner of forces upon them that may lead to depletion, fatigue, decay and loss of purpose and focus. These factors are unavoidable, as they accompany any intense effort to achieve something of value. Nonetheless, it is also important to recognize that they can be intentionally offset by various means of renewal that are selected and supported in order to keep the organization and its people continuously renewed in the face of the many challenges that come with attempting an ambitious program of supporting people to make far reaching progress with their lives. The means and pace of renewal can be calibrated to the degree to which the challenges deplete those involved as well as be precisely targeted to the specific needs or dimensions of renewal that are being generated. Should renewal not become a “built-in” and thoughtful agency led response to the challenges posed by highly relevant person centered work, then it is predictable that such efforts will decline in merit and quality. However, if renewal is thoughtfully and regularly addressed in a timely manner, both the people and the organization can be rebuilt and revitalized as needed.

Conclusion

These recommendations for key initial decision for community agencies that aspire to developing a greater degree of individualization of their services and supports are most useful if an agency is considering this prospect from the point of view of the eventual quality of what ensues. Individualization, like everything else in life, can be done with very poor quality and regard for the lives of those effected. Little is achieved and much harm can be created if individualization simply becomes a means of letting people down “one-at-a-time”. These recommendations highlight the fact that quality can be “built in” as a preoccupation from day one, though clearly varying degrees of quality are conceivable from dismal to exceptional. So, the key decision is not whether to individualize supports, but rather whether to do this properly.

