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STAFF and ADMINISTRATION

Negative work environments: A culture/climate improvement strategy

Hy Resnick

In last month's column I promised that my November column would deal with the problem of a negative work environment by suggesting methods of change to make it a more satisfying place in which to work.

The applied social sciences and the social work field have developed a number of intervention approaches that has had success using some of these methods. One approach* pioneered by the author and his colleague Dr. Rino Patti** for the social work field, is called "Change from Within" (CFW). It might be a good fit for the child care field and will be discussed in this column.

Change from Within

Some facts about CFW

1. It happens more often than most people think
2. It occurs when child care agencies' policies, programs, practices or procedures (the four Ps) adversely affect clients, staff or the agency culture
3. It is a legitimate process for a member of the helping profession to engage in if their goal is to help the agency improve its work environment or the quality of its services.
4. CFW is difficult, time consuming and sometimes a little scary. If effective, however, it is also a staff morale booster and a good teacher about the nature of organizational life.
5. The staff Action Group which typically develops in the CFW process must decide early in its work whether the process will be governed by an adversarial or collaborative approach.

Here's how it typically works

A worker (Change Catalyst) in a child care agency comes to recognize that a particular agency policy, practice, program or procedure is hurtful to clients and/or staff. She talks to a few coworkers to see if anything can be done to improve this problem situation. If the problem is bad enough or they feel strongly enough about it to do something, an ACTION GROUP is established which meets regularly and informally in the lunch room or

after hours in someone's house. This group's role is to "diagnose" the problem and develop a series of ACTION STEPS to address this problem. These steps typically include

1. strengthening the Action Group by including more members (a sometimes delicate process since it usually means excluding some coworkers who probably will feel confused or angry at not being included)
2. researching the issue to determine what other agencies are doing and/or what studies have been done to confirm (or disconfirm) the Action Group's perspective
3. preparing an overall STRATEGY (whether the basic approach would be collaborative or adversarial) and an ACTION PLAN both of which serves to guide their future actions. The ACTION PLAN will contain a number of specific steps to obtain support towards reducing or eliminating the problem situation. These steps could include
 - developing written material to communicate their ideas about the problem and what they are planning or considering. This material might be an email, telephone call or letters sent to the rest of the staff, and/or other branches of the agency. If need be the Board of Directors, local newspapers, and other agencies in the community might also be contacted. The latter decision is a delicate one requiring much thought and caution. It's one thing to talk to "one of your own" but its another thing to go outside the agency to share your "dirty laundry".
 - drafting a letter to management requesting a meeting to discuss this problem
 - participating in a simulated meeting with management to prepare the Action Group for the real meeting with management.
 - meeting with management to share the Action Group's thinking and recommendations re: the problem.
 - an Action Group evaluation session to review the meeting with management and to decide on next steps, if any, to insure implementation of the Action Plan (as possibly modified in the meeting with management).

This is not an easy process, but if the outcome is a more responsive agency then all the time and energy the ACTION GROUP expended will be worth it.

*Other models of organizational change will be addressed in future columns

**Dr Rino Patti, Dean of the School of Social Work, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

This feature: Dr Hy Resnick, Professor Emeritus, University of Washington, School of Social Work, Seattle, WA