



From David Cassani

Simple Living Centers

What we can learn from one another to help those with mental health issues or living in correctional facilities.

We invite contributions to this monthly newsletter.

Our own will or a higher will.

In 2001 I was offered a job at Sundance at the same time I was offered a job at a leading mental health center to be one of the co directors of a center serving 150 at risk youth with a staff of 300. I was hired and went to work, in charge of five departments and general operations of our 17 acres campus. The center had been in operation about 18 years when I came into the picture. Major changes happened in the two years I was there - that I felt to reflect on in this newsletter.

Collect honest useful information.

One of the first thing I noticed was we were collecting a great deal of data that the staff did not believe in or trust. A numbers and statistics were for JCAHO, a major accreditation team .. whose accreditation affected major funding sources. What I discovered is that they were not honest measures that anyone trusted or made sense of, yet previous directors were basically able to convince the accreditation team they were meaningful. They did look very impressive when presented so, but they were complicated and meaningless to the staff and demoralizing as the staff was pulled into a meaningless

numbers game. The effects on morale, wasted time and general effectiveness was not good.

Councils of Integrity and openness.

We decided to get more reliable measures and meaningful measures of our operation and talked about it together. What were those measures we needed to agree on, and connected with practical daily work, what was joint commission really looking for. What we discovered is joint commission really was on our side. They wanted measures and goals that demonstrated we were learning from our mistakes, not covering them up. Past staff had become somewhat fearful and felt they need to make things look good, in contrast to really just “BEING” good.

Looks at the needs of the group. Teamwork.

I went around the entire campus asking staff what their needs were to do their jobs better. Several said, no one ever asked them that question in 18 years. I did a liberal amount of listening, letting staff vent, and prioritized a list for the executive team, CEO and governing board. An honest effort to improve.

Wow, over time we got a needed break rooms for 300 staff, we changed colors on the walls of the school from cold institutional blue to warm inviting colors, we found funding for quiet chapel we built at almost a cost of 1/10 of standard funding - a place where youth could be quiet and reflect on spiritual things. - we expanded the baseball field, but working gardens in for the youth to grow vegetables. we found bidding practices were not being done consistent with law, and helped change this —whjch was follod by a wave of donations coming in after that. A new indoor pool, a major theatre complex, a state of the art OSHA compliant maintenance facility, a horse arena, the chapel - and improved laundry operations.

One staff joking.. said we need a hot tube to relax. I put it on the list. We did not get hot tube, we got funding for an indoor pool. Our theatre facility was rather limited, we got funding for a beautiful youth theater. We looked at how many youth were being manipulated with candy rewards and the diet options the youth had. Food quality improved and choices expanded for the youth. Answers to problems and new vision came from everyday employees.



Could mental health solutions be simple.

The air quality in the units was not good. The air was recirculate 100% of the time with little fresh air. Fresh air ducts were installed, improved filtering, and people liked hanging out in the sleeping units. Ceilings that repeatedly were being repaired were found to have structural problems that we repaired and the floors above the ceiling no longer squeaked and felt like they were bending when you walked on them.

Facilities always reflect people. After years of these problems and thousands of dollars being spent in bandaids repairs , we got to the root structural issues - repaired them and brought a wave of new improvements to the operation.

Student jobs were developed and gardens and horse programs expanded for the youth to work on. The entire operation went from incidents of fights almost daily to perhaps one every two or three months.

Results

I hope I am not exaggerating ... but it seemed to me we went from daily or weekly fights to perhaps an incident like a fight out of control youth every month or two. Contractors that worked on campus told me this place was like a war zone in the past, and they were really surprised to come on campus and see such a peaceful operation.

Openness, councils, timing, teams, facing fears, — everyday employees can be part of leading change.

Simple Solutions

Please share your own experiences if you have worked in mental health centers or in correctional facilities.