

Cultural Transformation: PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIC PLANNING TO TRANSFORM A SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY

Context:

The New Jersey-based Family Guidance Center (FGC) is an agency devoted to helping people in need, serving approximately 5000 clients in central New Jersey. FGC is a non-profit comprised of more than twenty different programs and offering various services designed to provide critical support for the distressed in the community, including men, women, children, and families. In the summer of 2014, FGC was a largely siloed organization in the midst of traditional strategic planning process involving a small group of dedicated board members and executive level staff.

Engagement Scope:

The goal was to broaden the strategic planning scope and utilize the planning initiative to effect cultural transformation. The intention was to create a significant “transforming exchange” (Olson & Eoyang, 2001) by introducing a large-scale intervention (LGI), otherwise known as a large group meeting. The nine-month initiative, utilizing a highly collaborative strategic planning process know as Real-time Strategic Planning (Jacobs, 1997), was comprised of participants from all levels of the organization and involved assigning key implementation roles to a number of these participants whom we labeled “champions.” In addition to effective strategic planning, our goals were to 1) promote inclusivity and break down the “we-they” perception between staff and upper management; 2) improve two-way communication across the agency; 3) promote FGC as one inclusive agency comprised of a variety of community services; 4) share or delegate leadership; 5) give the board an accessible “human face”; and 6) tap into the talent, expertise, and creativity of the entire agency.

Results:

This initiative achieved remarkable results. The first step was to transition the strategic planning committee into the planning to plan team (P2P), a planning team comprised of key constituents from across the organization to help plan the strategic planning process – not to create the actual strategic plan – and devise an implementation strategy that engaged stakeholders from across the agency. Beginning from the mindset of a traditional strategic planning process, this transition took the team four months of “connectivity” and dialogue to achieve. At the event, participants were seated at “max-mix” tables with representatives from all parts of the

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Results (continued):

agency and at least one board member (Kusy & McBain, 2000). The response to the strategic planning event was overwhelmingly positive based on the group's genuine appreciation for being asked to participate in an important organizational process. The jubilation FGC members experienced at being truly valued and respected was on full display. As indicated by post event evaluations, as well as the comments and dialogues at the tables, participants valued being asked to be part of FGC's important planning process; their enthusiasm, talent, creativity, and ideas flowed.

References

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