

Promoting a Recovery-focused Workplace: Getting the Right People in the Door

Recovery is a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the effects of ...illness."

Anthony, Cohen, Farkas, Gagne Psychiatric Rehabilitation (2002)

About Recovery

According to SAMHSA, "recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential" (SAMHSA 2011). Recovery does not mean living a symptom-free life – people living lives of recovery may continue to experience symptoms of addiction or mental health challenges, but they move forward with their lives.

You can recognize a recovery-focused organization by its values of choice, hope, person orientation, and partnership. (Farkas, 2007). *Choice* could be seen through increased access to and integration of services and an expanded array of services for people to explore and achieve their rehabilitation and recovery goals. If your organization led with the value of choice, there would be services that helped people with real life goals like employment, education, and economic self-sufficiency, as well as strengthened social relationships, dating, marriage and raising children. People would have a *choice* of who they might work with to achieve their goals, and there would be ample opportunity to experience the power of peer support.

Hope would see more service participants and staff who actually believe that a change in the way services are offered would be a good thing and that it would be supported by regulators, funders, other professionals, peers, and family. Change in services and service provision would be embraced rather than resisted.

True *partnership* would be evident with people in recovery involved in the planning and delivery of services at all levels of the organization. The value of *person orientation* would see fewer rules that excluded or discharged people from services and more flexibility in accessing and utilizing them. We would also see people become less dependent on behavioral health services and more actively involved in community activities and roles.

Organizational Culture & Recovery

When an organization is recovery oriented, its organizational culture reflects that guiding belief. Organizational culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders and communicated and reinforced through policies and practices. This culture sets the context for everything the organization does, defining accepted ways to behave within that organization and shapes employee perceptions, behaviors, and understanding. If you are looking for recovery-focused employees, you need to consider whether or not your existing organizational culture reflects and supports these values. If the organizational culture is not recovery centered, are you willing to embrace the changes needed to support a recovery-focused practice environment?

Start a conversation with leadership using these discussion **questions**:

- How do we currently provide services and is it most conducive to helping people reach their goals and helping our organization achieve its desired outcomes?
- What, if anything, would have to change for us to be more successful and for staff to feel supported in moving towards a recovery-focused system of care?
- Do participants' concerns and staff responses get shared with management?
- Are policies such as affirmative action, drug and alcohol use, and past criminal history supportive of people who might have a lived experience of mental illness, substance use, or trauma?
- How do we encourage supervisors to help staff use their own experiences with trauma, mental health, and substance use to enhance their practice?

The answers to these questions can reveal your organization's willingness to do business in a different way. Fundamental to this process is the belief that change is possible, will result in something positive, and will be supported by staff, management, and participants. Without that understanding, moving towards a recovery-focused system could be slowed down.

If your organizational culture does not appear ready to change, you might need to work with management to ensure that everyone understands what recovery-focused services are and how they will benefit the organization. A supportive organizational culture will encourage and support staff as they move to a recovery-focused approach.

Finding the Right People

A recovery-focused organization requires a workforce that deeply believes in recovery. To ensure this, we need to assess the extent to which our existing staff are recovery champions and provide training and supervision to those who are not. Some people may find that the recovery orientation is not a good match with their personal philosophy

and will leave the organization. This gives organizations a chance to bring in new people who are better aligned with this approach. So we need to find staff who practice or are open to learning how to practice behavioral health care in a way that promotes recovery for all service recipients in a person centered, integrated, inclusive and trauma informed way.

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**Job
Descriptions**

Job descriptions are employees' first exposure to what the organization is and what it expects from staff. Make sure job descriptions specify that you are seeking applicants who are open to learning, sensitive to the needs of people receiving services, respectful, and who believe in the growth potential of all human beings, regardless of the severity of their behavioral health challenges. It is essential to be clear about expectations, roles, responsibilities, reporting, and the need for continuous learning.

To make the importance of a recovery-focused approach as clear as possible, ensure the job description not only lists the job tasks and qualifications but that it also states the values and principles that the organization expects from its staff and the organization's emphasis on team work and continual learning.

Teamwork and continual learning are cornerstones of a recovery-focused approach and staff who are open to working collaboratively with other staff and service participants will be better able to adapt to this approach. Staff may not yet be knowledgeable in recovery-focused practice, but an employee open to continual learning demonstrates the flexibility required to learn new techniques.

Begin your job description with an **Organizational Overview** that includes what the organization does, what it believes in, and what it expects for its service participants:

- *ABC Organization offers mental health and substance use outpatient clinic services to all people ages 16 and up in the five boroughs of New York City. Services are delivered in a recovery-focused manner which means we practice in an innovative, integrated, person centered, trauma informed way that maximizes each service participant's opportunities for self-determination and success in achieving the goals of their choice. ABC Organization believes in every person's right to determine their own goals and to achieve a full life of recovery in the community.*

Follow with a **Program Description** and make sure you include a clear reporting chain of command as well as making it clear that the position requires a "team player."

- *The training specialist will provide training and technical assistance in evidence based practices to providers of service throughout New York State and will work within the Division of Recovery and Rehabilitation, reporting directly to the Division Director and working collaboratively with all members of the Recovery and Rehabilitation division.*
- *The Care Manager helps service participants actively pursue their own meaningful life in the community as independently as possible including assisting with housing, employment, medical, and behavioral health needs. The Care Manager will report to the Director of Outreach Services and work collaboratively with all staff in the Outreach Division.*

Next, state your organization’s **Core Principles** (the principles and values that are essential to maintain a culture that is recovery-focused and trauma informed).

- *All staff of ABC Organization are expected to integrate the mission, values, and vision of the organization into their work and their relationship with every service participant. This includes practicing with the understanding that every service participant:*
 - *has the right to determine the outcome of their own life*
 - *deserves respectful communication with every staff member they interact with*
 - *will participate in services that support their recovery and healing*
 - *will experience trauma-informed interactions with staff*
 - *will have their unique culture, background, experience, identity, and values respected and nurtured within their relationship with every staff person*

Now, list the **Essential Job Functions** - be inclusive, but use only those responsibilities that are most important to the job. Watch the wording you use to assure you are modeling person centered and recovery-focused approaches. Avoid words that imply “doing for” the participant, opting instead for words like “collaborate” and “facilitate” to reinforce that the service participant is driving the services. Here are some examples:

- *Collaborate with service participants to identify and develop their own life goals and a timeline that works for them in reaching those goals.*
- *Work with service participants to acquire the skills and supports needed to advocate for themselves so they can reach their goals.*
- *Ensure all service plans consider culture and ethnic backgrounds, customs, needs, beliefs, and preferred language.*

Flexibility is a cornerstone of a recovery-focused practice since practitioners are asked to approach services through a different lens. Sometimes this can require new, different, or even non-traditional delivery of services. Stress the importance of flexibility by including language such as “*responsibilities may include but are not limited to*” or “*perform any other duties as assigned by the supervisor/director.*”

Job descriptions should also emphasize the importance of continuous learning and adherence to best practices in recovery, integrated health, and trauma informed care. You might include a key responsibility such as:

- *Stay current on recovery based and trauma informed practices and trends in behavioral health and share practice innovations. (If your program model and budget allow, you might also include an expectation such as “Participate in online and in-person conferences and forums about relevant issues”)*

Finally, you are ready for **Job Qualifications**. Be inclusive. State clearly that you value diversity. For example:

- *ABC Organization seeks talent from all cultures, religions, races, and gender expressions with the following qualifications:*

As the first qualification, state clearly that you expect staff providing services to demonstrate:

- *Commitment to person centered, recovery-focused and trauma informed treatment strategies, upholding participants rights and self-determination in service provision.*

If a certain level of education or licensing is not required by state law or licensing body, be flexible with your requirements, and consider allowing experience to substitute for some level of education. What is most important is bringing on staff who are skilled and have a flexible approach to learning so that they can incorporate the recovery-focused and trauma informed methods in their practice.

- *Master’s in Social Work preferred but a combination of experience and education will be considered.*

When you are ready, consider encouraging candidates with *lived experience*. Many workers in behavioral health organizations have experienced their own mental health, substance use, homelessness, or other trauma related challenges that have motivated them into “giving back” by becoming helping professionals. Some of our workers may not be identified as peers but have their own experience with the behavioral health system. This lived experience can be a powerful tool if identified, nurtured, and channeled into proper use. Make it clear that your organization is a place where it is safe to disclose your own mental health, substance use, or trauma related experiences by making statements such as:

- *Our organization strives to provide reasonable accommodation for any known physical or behavioral health challenge or limitation for qualified employees with disabilities to the extent that the requested accommodation will not impose an undue hardship on the operation of our services.*
- *Lived experience with mental health/substance use and/or trauma related challenges preferred (to encourage self-disclosure)*

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Interview Tips

You have posted your job and attracted some candidates. Now you need to interview them to decide which people are the right match for your recovery-focused organization.

Start by asking questions that will allow applicants to talk about their beliefs, and the ability of people to really grow and change, and to live full lives of recovery despite their diagnoses and challenges. Try these interview **questions**:

- In your practice, can you share how you have helped service participants recognize and value their own unique contributions?
- How do you see recovery as different or the same as treatment?
- What do you think recovery is and what is it not?
- How have you helped service participants become more involved with their communities and develop community relationships?

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Listen for answers that demonstrate the applicant believes that people with behavioral health challenges and trauma histories deserve to be an active part of their normal community's activities and can achieve that goal. Does the applicant see service participants as valued members of the community who may go to the library, use local food co-ops, volunteer, go to movies or attend other social events?

Some other key things to listen for:

- *When talking about what a service recipient contributes, do the possibilities mentioned reflect a sense of equality with others, or are they contributions "diminished" by the participant's challenges?*
- *Does the applicant seem to understand that recovery is a participant's personal journey and as the practitioner, their job is to nurture and support that journey, not take it themselves?*
- *Look for the applicant's understanding that recovery and treatment are linked but not the same. Some people can even recover without treatment.*

Look for flexibility and belief in the growth potential in all people, including those with behavioral health challenges. Explore whether the applicant believes all service participants can reach for and obtain a "normal" life.

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Next in the interview, delve a little deeper with questions that can uncover how the applicant's beliefs translate into their actual practice. In these questions you are teasing out if the applicant actually puts recovery beliefs into action. But note: the applicant may not know how to transform their recovery beliefs into practice since they may not have been trained this way. In that case look for a willingness to learn new ways to practice and be open to change. **Questions** to ask might include:

- How would recovery show itself in your practice?
- Would you ever use self-disclosure in your practice? If so, how and when would you use it?

***Listen for answers** that point to experiences with service participants being actively involved with their treatment, such as only convening case discussions with the person present, work with peer support specialists, or openness to alternative interventions such as acupuncture or reiki, meditation, support animals, or hearing voices groups.*

A recovery-focused practitioner is comfortable using their own lived experience therapeutically and understands the power of that experience. This might be a place in the interview where an applicant might feel comfortable self-disclosing. How an applicant views his/her own recovery will give the interviewer insight into how they would view a program participant's recovery journey. In more traditional programs, disclosure of personal history might be considered taboo. In recovery-focused organizations, appropriate disclosures are viewed as assets, not disqualifiers.

You can also learn a lot about an applicant's belief system and ability to learn and grow by asking **questions** that allow you to understand how the applicant sees his/her job responsibilities and what parts of the job might be the most gratifying and the most challenging.

- In your current position, how do you spend most of your time?
- What have been your biggest challenges in other jobs?
- Describe something you did with a service participant that you were proud of.

***Listen for answers** that share what the applicant sees as the most important part of their work because that is often what they spend the most time thinking about, worrying about, feeling good about, and being challenged by.*

Look for an applicant who is proud of an accomplishment that helped a participant return to a satisfying and successful life role, whatever that might be. This question can demonstrate many things including, flexibility, hope, respect, and understanding.

If you are ready to ask some more controversial questions, you might gain important insight into the extent of the applicant's recovery beliefs and how it impacts the way they practice. What you are looking for with these questions is the applicant's ability to help service participants set goals that are "normalized" and hopeful, demonstrating a belief in the potential for all people to grow and thrive. Look for the understanding that all participants, regardless of the severity of their challenges, must be the leaders of their treatment and care. Talk with applicants about how they work with people with more serious behavioral health challenges. Try these **questions**:

- From your experience, what kinds of goals do you believe are appropriate or not appropriate for people receiving services?
- To what extent do you think service participants should be involved in decision making in their own treatment and in the design of services at your program?
- Think back on your experiences and talk about the likelihood of recovery for some of the participants that you have worked with.
- Have you ever worked with a peer as part of your team? What was that experience like for you?

Listen for answers that demonstrate the applicant has hope and believes in everyone's potential for growth.

Watch for stigmatizing language such as "chronic" or "abuser" that might show the applicant does not practice recovery for all, but only for those they feel might be most able to attain it. Also look for an openness to recognize peers on the team as equal partners. Look for their willingness to include peer team members equally in all aspects of treatment and service planning, and to use their ideas as readily as they would any other team member.

Involving participants in the hiring process

When your team is ready for a different perspective and a first-person account of "what can help and what might hurt," invite service participants to participate in the hiring process. Observe the applicant's reactions to this less traditional approach. Candidate's reactions can reveal a deeper layer of their recovery belief system.

Speak with your Human Resources department about shifting the way you conduct interviews to include service participants. By involving them in the actual interview process, they are likely to feel more actively engaged in their own treatment, you will be able to see how the applicant interacts with them before hiring, and you will get valuable input from the people who the applicant will be supporting. Try these ideas:

- Ask service participants screen resumes or join you in telephone pre-screening calls
- Ask participants to contribute interview questions

- Discuss final applicants and their qualifications with a team of service participants and interviewing staff
- Invite final applicants to attend a service event such as a luncheon, meeting, or group session
- Include service participants in the entire interview process itself as a part of the interview team

Look for signs that show the applicant is open to a recovery-focused, person centered and trauma informed practice by inviting input from participants during the interview process. Look for signs of discomfort from the applicant when sharing information about them with participants, or when questioned by participants about their expertise or approach.

Some applicants may not have ever experienced this kind of participant involvement before, and might display signs of being ill at ease, so make sure to also look for flexibility and openness to new ways of doing things.

Measuring Performance

Once staff are hired and their responsibilities and reporting are clearly outlined, the organization's next step is training, supervision, and performance measurement, all delivered with an eye to practicing in a recovery-focused and trauma informed manner. It still is not customary to train behavioral health professionals in recovery-focused practice, and most academic programs do not focus on these issues. Therefore, your staff development program should require trainings on a range of topics that impact recovery in mental health and substance use, including trauma informed practices and strategies to help people achieve community integration (such as benefits planning, dating, or parenting), harm reduction, motivational interviewing, and skills that help people manage strong emotions. You might also encourage staff who are strong recovery advocates to mentor newer staff to encourage adherence to recovery-focused, trauma informed service provision and values.

One of the best ways to know if your staff are having a positive impact on service participants is to ask the participants themselves.

- Develop a mechanism for service participants to share their opinion of staff performance. Participant's perception of success in reaching their goals and staff perception of that same thing can be different so try to elicit responses from both.
- Assure that participants' responses and perceptions are shared with both the staff person (*if the participant gives permission*) and their supervisor. Use these perceptions and ratings as part of an ongoing staff development and performance improvement plan.

- Include participant ratings within the performance review. Set a standard for an “acceptable” rating.

Note that staff who listen to participants and respond to their requested needs are demonstrating recovery-focused practice. Some measures that can help you assess this are:

- Listens and responds to service participants’ needs promptly, accurately, with courtesy, respect, and sound personal and professional ethics, including respect for cultural differences
- Models appropriate on-the-job behavior to service participants
- Demonstrates recovery principles in interactions with service participants

Other areas to include in a performance evaluation might include:

- The use of language and whether written documentation uses non-stigmatizing language in all interactions with service recipients
- Observations of actual practice, perhaps by sitting in on groups or individual sessions. Comment on signs that the staff person understands and operationalizes key principles of recovery and trauma informed practice such as the use of non-stigmatizing language, acceptance and flexibility, hope, and respect.

While you should evaluate performance in a wide range of domains, it is essential to assess their practice based on principles that are essential to health care transformation:

- **Trauma-informed care:** contributes to an environment that offers choice and autonomy whenever possible and helps people feel emotionally and physically safe.
- **Recovery orientation:** contributes to an environment that supports a person’s self-identified goals in the domains of work, education, family, home, and community life.
- **Integrated health:** contributes to an environment that addresses whole health including mental health, substance use, physical health, and social determinants of health.
- **Person-centered approaches:** contributes to an environment that promotes person-centered language, individualized service delivery preferences and cultural responsiveness.

Change takes time and does not occur overnight. It requires resources, and the commitment and support of management at all levels within the organization. One of the most important pieces of the change process is assuring you have the right staff to support your mission, vision, and values. That means not only recruiting and hiring the right staff but training them in the concrete tools of recovery and trauma informed practice, supervising them in an ongoing way to learn and maintain the competencies needed and evaluating their performance of these practice competencies. If done right, the change to a recovery-focused

organization can yield substantial benefits as well as release the creative energy of staff and participants to develop new services and achieve common goals.

References

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