



Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Creating a Culture Based on Recovery and Resilience

A three-part presentation on creating and sustaining a recovery culture.

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Part One: Creating a Recovery Culture

“ We are the organisms that make up the organization. We are the living, breathing element that keeps the organizational heart beating. Within each of us is where the transformation happens, then it is reflected outward into the mission and vision and values; the bricks and mortar; the policies and procedures, that hold the organization together.”

I wrote the above statement 16 years ago. The back story goes something like this: I was searching for approaches to changing the culture of our own organization in ways that would support the recovery of people who use their services. I read a few books about changing cultures and they all seemed to make sense. However, when I tried to apply the academic concepts, I quickly lost interest and also lost my way on what I hoped would be a path to inspiring insights and aha moments. So I decided to just take deep dives into a variety of organizations, sort of a modified ethnographic plunge, and see what I could discover.

My first attempts had to do with “observation.” I thought if I watched the daily operations of an organization I would be able to detect the underlying cultural patterns. I asked myself, “Where IS the culture? Where does it live?” “Culture” seemed like a thin coat of dust that covered everything in the organization. Maybe it was more like an invisible iron webbing that was strong enough to determine every decision and action that took place in the organization. Struggling to understand the dynamics of culture, I began my search.

Surely the roots of an organization’s culture went deeper than what was held in the dusty policy manuals that nobody reads unless the auditors are approaching. But I looked there anyway. It was a futile attempt, but I waded through lots of policy manuals. I don’t recommend this – there was no enlightenment to be found there in terms of cultural “roots.”

I moved on to the bricks and mortar. At first glance, one might think they held some secrets about how the culture was manifested. Upon closer examination this possibility didn't hold up because both recovery-based cultures and non-recovery-based cultures were present in all sorts of buildings and grounds.

My next stop was to look at the vision and mission statements of various organizations. I thought for sure I could get a glimpse of the origins of culture in these statements. I guess I wasn't too surprised to learn that there was often a huge gap between what an organization says about themselves, and what they actually do. That "gap" said something about the culture, but I didn't have enough clues yet to determine just how to read it.

While I didn't come away from my search with the answers I had hoped to find, I did learn a lot about how powerful and elusive the culture of any organization was. Even though I still couldn't describe it or find its roots yet, I at least knew what and where it wasn't.

I turned my attention back to our own organization and continued the attempt to understand and develop a recovery culture. The year was 1999. We didn't know what we'd turn out like when we began this journey. We didn't have a roadmap, and there were no bread crumbs scattered along the path by others who had gone before us. We just knew that if we were going to create opportunities for people to recover, we needed to change our culture.

We knew enough to start with our mission statement, which had been written many years earlier: "To be the premiere provider of crisis stabilization services." This statement seemed OK to us until we looked at it through the eyes of recovery. When we did this, it seemed to be way off. It was definitely not a statement that we could use to guide us toward transformation by establishing a recovery culture. Our CEO, who had written this statement several years earlier, looked at it, squinted, and said "yuck! This is all about us being a great provider. Instead, it should be about the people who use our services, and how we can help them in their recovery." We all agreed and started the rewriting process.

It took us a while to figure out that who we were being was at least as important as what we were doing. In other words, the work we were doing and the way we did it was important, but if our attitudes were misaligned with recovery values, we wouldn't be able to sustain the effort necessary to change our culture. By now it was clear to us that this change wasn't just a matter of developing new recovery-based policies and practices for the organization. It wasn't about painting the walls and planning new shrubs. Each one of us needed to be willing to learn a new way of being that emulated the values of recovery.

We were beginning to realize that we needed to be inspired and revitalized by our values

instead of being driven by rules and regulations. Yes, we had to live within the confines of the rules, but if rules and regulations became our vision, our focus, we'd be trying to put "new wine into old wineskins" which would severely limit our ability to create a new way of being. We needed to have the courage to step beyond what was known and familiar and move into new territory if we were going to create a culture that would sustain our vision of recovery.

Staying focused on our values without being distracted by our old ways of being was more of a challenge than you might think. After a few confusing conversations it became obvious that we needed to clearly define the nature of our values. Our existing list of values didn't begin to provide us with the inspiration or direction we needed to travel into uncharted territory. We needed to create new ones that reflected what we hoped to grow into as we transformed our culture and ourselves. We finally came up with a set of values and a vision and mission statement we could reliably use to guide our progress toward the development of a recovery culture.

Our initial goal was to transform the services we were providing in ways that would help people recover. Frankly, we were naive enough to think this was all we needed to do to establish a recovery culture. If we'd known at the time how much our organization needed to change, and how much we ourselves would need to change, we probably would have given it a lot more thought before jumping in (but we would have jumped in just the same.) We truly personified the quip, "ignorance is bliss".

Transforming our culture was an amazing journey for us. As I mentioned earlier, there were no bread crumbs, no tracks left by pioneers for us to follow so we relied on our collective internal compasses of "gut instinct" to guide us. We continually asked ourselves "if we are a recovering organization, how would we do this, or that?"

So yes, we started by looking at the services we were delivering and tried to find better ways to help people recover. We took a close look at how we were treating the people who used our services; the language we used to describe them and the expectations we had for them.

The tipping point came into view when we hired some people with lived experience of mental illness to work alongside of us. We had just been awarded a grant to train peer employees and needed to hire peer instructors to do the training. Those peer employees, plus the peers in the classes, started to gently (sometimes not so gently) teach us and change us. Their courage to look closely at themselves and the things that held them back gave us the courage to do the same thing. With their input, we began to realize just how much we needed to change and grow if we were really going to transform our culture and become a recovery

organization that could make a real difference in people's lives.

As we looked at ourselves through the eyes of our peers, we began to realize the scope of the challenge. Tweaking a few things would not create a recovery culture. Each of us individually needed to be willing to learn new ways of being. This took the challenge of transformation to a personal level. We each needed to make a commitment to learn and grow new parts of ourselves if we were going to have a transformed culture in our organization.