



Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Creating a Culture Based on Recovery and Resilience

This is part II of a multi-part narrative on recovery culture.

by Dr. Lori Ashcraft

Part Two: 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.”

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 become a transformed recovery organization that could make a real difference in people’s lives.

Once we started looking at ourselves and our organization, we began to realize the scope of the challenge. Tweaking a few things would not get us to transformation. 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 organization.

Being willing to change can be quite a challenge, even for the most mature among us. You may have some of the same things rattling around in your heads that we had in ours:

“Oh no,” you say. “Not us. We don’t need to change. We’re the CEOs, the managers, the supervisors. We know what we’re doing.”

“I’m the Director of Human Resources. I enforce the personnel policies. This doesn’t apply to me.”

“Well I’m the IT guy; I don’t do that touchy feely stuff. I’m about computers and systems, and besides.....”

“Hmm. I’m the CFO and I need to keep track of the budget. I can’t get distracted by a transformation. Someone around here needs to keep their head and be reasonable.”

“Well I’m just a clerk. I file things and answer the phone. This isn’t about me. I’m not important.”

WRONG! It’s about all of us. 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.

As we begin to transform ourselves and then our organization, our immediate focus shifts from the mundane to more meaningful points of reference. We realize that the seeds of transformation grow from within us, so we start paying attention to who we are becoming and how we are being. Yes, we still need to make sure the cogs in the various wheels line up; the paperwork is completed, and the bills get paid; but it’s not our main focus anymore. Instead we pay attention to bringing out the best in each other; staying focused on our collective and individual strengths; being respectful and kind to each other; keeping our word and being accountable. These ways of being create safe ground – a place where we can risk not knowing, and then growing; rich soil to support the growth of transformation. Once this groundwork has been laid, it’s time to pick up speed.

Transformation seems to happen best when it gets off to a roaring start. Remember Carl Sagan, the astronomer and astrophysicist, who for years calmly described complicated scientific issues to us on the Discovery channel? Carl was best known for the way he explained the beginning of the universe -- the “big bang.” He describes the “big bang” as an “original event” that draws the line between the past and the possibility for the future. We took a page out of Carl’s book when we realized we needed a “big bang” that would keep us from being stuck in the past and provide enough momentum for a lift-off into transformation. But where would our “big bang” begin?

Most organizations have a closet where they keep their shadows, and our closet was in

the large crisis programs we managed. Fueling transformation with shadows (rocket fuel) would create a really big bang, and create the momentum to shoot us beyond the pull of gravity. Our biggest shadow, our dark side, consisted of the seclusion and restraint we used on those who came to us for help. We were training the staff in recovery principles and practices, but were still secluding and restraining people.

This was a “big bang” waiting to happen. By now we had a lot of the things we were doing but hadn’t cleaned the closet yet. So our CEO declared that we would no longer seclude or restrain people in our programs. He was ready to stop being reasonable and to step right into something that was thought to be impossible. We weren’t sure we wanted to go with him.

“Okay” the rest of us said, “but it won’t work. This time you’ve gone too far. This is unreasonable.” We now know that stepping over that “reasonableness” line is a key part of transformation, a necessary step; a preamble for the “big bang.” “What if we get hurt? What if we get a licensing citation? What if our insurance premiums go up?”

Some staff left because they couldn’t imagine living through the “big bang.” They were comfortable with the old way even though it didn’t work very well. As we watched them go, we were tempted to shout the words of Harry Truman after them: “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the Kitchen!” But we also thought maybe we should just turn the thermostat down so we could all be more comfortable. At this point we had peers on our workforce and they were watching and coaching us. With their support we proceeded with the “big bang” and were able to eliminate all seclusion and restraint in our facilities.

Once the decks have been cleared by the big bang, there is space to do new things. The temptation may be to start filling that space with old familiar stuff because you aren’t sure what else to do. You may also be so proud of yourself for your big bang that you think it’s time to kick back, rest on your laurels, and be poised to accept compliments for your efforts. Or you may have some of the same thoughts we had – “maybe just a little touch-up and a few tweaks, then we’ll be ready to put a “recovery” sign up on our door.” We hope you’ll resist the temptation of fixing up old stuff, and will “big bang” your way into a transformation. It’s not easy, but the pay off is more than worth it. A few staff may leave, and at times you may want to silently beg them to take you with them. You catch yourself bargaining for mercy:

“Can’t we just change the forms?”

“Do we have to look at who we are being? Can’t we just adjust how we do the work?”

“Besides, we’re already doing all this! Aren’t we?”

“And anyway, this may be how it works for you guys, but we’re really different. We are very unique. Stand on your shoulders? Nope! Won’t work! We’ve got to develop all our own stuff which will take decades.”

“Oh, and also, we have too many regulations, way more than anyone else, and our Board of Directors is very conservative, and our funding source dictates a very prescribed method of doing everything, and besides our doctors will never agree to this.”

“And anyway, we don’t have any funding for this.”

“And by the way, the people who use our services, the patients, well, they’re just a lot sicker than yours.”

When you finally look up from all this handwringing, look for your own “big bang” and head on down the trail of transformation. It’s the easiest path in the long run because it clears a space for new possibilities to emerge.

I think we may need to stop here and let you digest some of this information, especially the part about the “Big Bang”. In part III we will be introducing you to many tools that we have developed over the years to promote and sustain a recovery culture. Chris Martin, my work partner for the past 25 years, is a master tool maker. I’ve asked him to join us and describe some of the tools that will be most help for you, no matter what phase of cultural transformation you may be in. So stand by for Chris and the enthusiasm and joy he brings to the transformation process.