

Session A: Learning Organizations: Creating New Evidence Based Practices

General Overview

This breakout session brought two organizations together to provide examples of how they became learning organizations. The examples provided perspectives from both state and county level organizations.

Major Themes

What does it mean to be a learning organization?

To be a learning organization, organizations must learn from their own practical experiences and utilize data as a guide to what is working and what is not. All too often organizations do not track their service delivery and monitor the impact on outcomes. Being able to collect data and use the information for decision making and service delivery enhancements allows organizations to develop their employees' skills. It also moves the organization in different directions and provides opportunities for philosophical changes, thus it moves the organization in an evidence based direction. No matter the experience level of staff, organizations should keep moving toward becoming a learning organization, understanding that in the future the evidence may be different than it is today. This is a very dynamic process and continuous learning is essential.

Personal Mastery

Personal mastery is continually clarifying and deepening personal vision, focusing energies, developing patience, and seeing reality objectively. Keeping in mind that we will make mistakes as we go, but this is part of learning and making enhancements to our processes. Learning organizations incorporate feedback loops to staff so they can learn what is working and what is not working. This also gives staff the opportunity to provide input, suggestions, and opinions.

Mental Models

Using mental models is a way to understanding the deeply engrained assumptions, generalizations, or mental images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action (e.g., management of offenders). Being able to influence behavior change in anyone is a skill that needs to be thought through and practiced. Just like organizations want to create behavior change in the offenders, the same is true with staff when becoming a learning organization. Providing staff with the environment to learn, make mistakes, and develop their skills allows them to opportunity to make changes.

Building a Shared Vision

Building a shared vision is a way to build collaborative creations of organizational goals, identity, vision, and actions shared by members. Benefits of building a shared vision provides a catalyst for organizations (e.g. mental health, substance abuse, courts) to have a shared vision about providing services to offenders and the process to reducing recidivism. It also allows an opportunity to build a team and open the lines of communication between stakeholders.

Team Learning

Team learning is the creation of opportunities for individuals to work and learn together (collaboratively) in a community where it is safe to innovate, learn and try anew. This process allows staff to learn research, develop skills, and practice what they have learned in their own environment. An example of team learning would be to provide a time in staff meetings where staff bring research articles and discuss the content and brainstorm how the research can be put into practice.

System Thinking

System thinking is viewing the system/organization as a whole (integrated); creating a conceptual framework that provides connections between units and staff. The process involves reflection of services and outcomes, reevaluation, action, and providing opportunities for rewards.

Conclusion

Creating a learning organization takes time, patience, a willingness to make mistakes and create opportunities for success. Many organizations have different environments (e.g. rural, urban, state system, and/or county systems) and identifying what works for your organization and the dynamics in which you function is a part of creating your own learning organization and developing your organization's individual evidence to what works in reducing recidivism. Personal Mastery, developing mental models with staff, building a shared vision with stakeholders, learning as a team, and system thinking are all ways that organizations can truly become learning organizations. Remember that being willing to fail and learn from your organizations mistakes allows your organization to grow and become more successful.