Implementing Social Role Valorization Across a Large Human Service Organization: Lessons & Learning

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Introduction

OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS, we have worked extensively in partnership with a large human service organization to develop and implement a comprehensive training and development system to encourage responsive, high quality human services rooted in Social Role Valorization (Osburn, 2006; Race, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1998). We have tried to provoke a renewed focus on the role of services and service workers in helping people to experience full and rich lives by having valued social roles.

We have been in somewhat of a unique situation of being able to work over a sustained period of time with one agency, and apply concerted planning, resources, time, and focused attention to this task. We began this project with many goals and expectations, and as so often happens, found unexpected difficulties in some areas and surprising growth in others. It seems that the lessons learned from our efforts can support the work of others who are working to use Social Role Valorization (SRV) within formal human service organizations.

Keystone Human Services (KHS) is a large multi-state non-profit organization which was founded in 1972. With over 2500 employees across eight operating agencies in four states, Keystone is one of the larger provider agencies. At its inception, Keystone looked quite different than it does now. The organization was founded very much out of a commitment to social change and personal human service. Its founder, Dennis Felty, was one of a small group of people who worked at the Harrisburg (Pennsylvania, US) State Hospital at the time, and became convinced that the people living there could live a very different life if afforded the right supports. A small group of citizens began meeting and discussing possibilities for people to leave the institution. In their discussions and exploration, they discovered new ideas which were being used to find alternative ways for people with disabilities to live more fully, one of which was normalization.

THE PRINCIPLES OF NORMALIZATION (Wolfensberger, 1972) were powerful philosophical, ideological, and practical driving forces behind the development of the services. The founders speak fondly of the early days of the organization, when many decisions were made by asking employees to use their Program Analysis of Service Systems (PASS) (Wolfensberger *&* Glenn, 1975) manuals to guide them in decision making. Over the next 30 years, rapid growth and development in the size of the organization, the variety of services provided, and the many geographical locations have caused KHS to look quite different from that early organization. As the organization grew, the leadership was concerned about slippage in the original vision and values that had shaped KHS. Dennis Felty, who has continued on as the President of Keystone, decided to start an inter-

nal training institute. He wanted the focus of the Keystone Institute (KI) to be that of preserving the enduring values and vision of the organization, strengthening the commitment of the work force to the people served, and communicating and teaching the core organizational principles and values to those who join the organization. Staff at the KI, under the leadership of Dr. Janet Kelley, decided that one of the best ways to go about achieving what Dennis Felty wanted was to develop a critical mass of people within KHS who will be able to do the aforementioned things.

To build critical mass, the key organizational efforts of the KI have included three major thrusts of action:

I. Provision of Extensive Training in Social Role Valorization & Related Topics

THE FIRST THRUST IS PROVIDING an extensive, regular formal training schedule. We have developed and provided an annual schedule for six years with an array of educational opportunities that include:

1) Core Social Role Valorization events, such as SRV and PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007), which are offered at regular, periodic intervals. SRV is offered in a variety of formats that are carefully designed to advance people's understanding from a beginner to an advanced grasp of the SRV material. For example, we offer an introductory SRV module which is presented as part of staff orientation in all of the agencies in KHS, a one-day presentation, a three-day presentation, and the four-day leadership presentation developed by the Syracuse University Training Institute.[1]

2) Events that cover more advanced topics, e.g., "Model Coherency," "Threats to the Sanctity of Life of Devalued People," etc., are routinely offered to participants who wish to further their knowledge; and

3) Workshops that primarily focus on the implementation of Social Role Valorization concepts, e.g., "Supporting People to Have a Meaningful Day," "What Is a Home," and others.

All the agencies are expected to encourage staff in different positions to attend the workshops that will strengthen their work. The number of people who have, and have not, attended the workshops is tracked, and the Executive Director of the Keystone Institute meets annually with the different agency directors and training coordinators to help them to establish an overall staff development plan. This plan includes targeting who will be attending what workshops throughout the coming year. This thrust of actions is intended to 'spread the word' to as many people as possible, but also to 'cast the net' for potential leaders. It is largely through these workshops that KI staff are able to identify those people who are keenly interested in further developing their SRV knowledge and competency.

There is a relatively high level of participation in Keystone Institute events. On average, 75% of the top agency leadership staff have attended a three-day introductory SRV workshop, 55% of the management and supervisory staff, and 22% of the regular work force. The Keystone Institute provided over 9000 participant hours of training in 2006. Each agency funds the Keystone Institute costs as a percentage of their annual operating budget, so agencies want to make the most of these resources by fully participating in available educational events.

II. Development & Support of New Leaders

IN ORDER FOR SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION to be used to assist the people we serve to have better lives, we knew we needed to identify new leaders, support them, and provide them with mentoring and coaching. The following are questions that we have grappled with and worked diligently to address: How do we find and call forth leadership? How do we nurture their development? How do we assist and support them to lead? Some of our answers to these questions are described below by the leadership programs we have put in place.

III. Implementation of What Has Been Taught

A THIRD FOCUS OF OUR efforts has been to assist

interested parties to use the ideas that are taught in our workshops. We help with implementation in a number of ways, e.g., by making resources (books, articles, consultation, knowledgeable people) available to people and organizations, providing consultation and follow-along as needed, and generally assisting individual services and programs to increase the responsiveness and quality of their services. Often, people who are part of the leadership group will assist in the consultations. Consultations are provided on a number of levels: to the agency, service or program teams, or to individuals. An example of this type of consultation at the agency level would include helping agencies to develop hiring processes which communicate positively and clearly about the people served and the role of the service worker in the lives of the people they serve. At the program level, we have, for example, been asked to assist specific services to develop processes to encourage, track, and focus on valued roles for the people who are served. On the individual level, we have been asked to help support teams plan for the future for a specific person that they serve.

Results

IN ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF all our efforts within the above three areas, several ideas emerge as those which have been most successful.

Finding & Fortifying Leaders

EARLY IN OUR WORK, WE identified a group of interested and experienced employees within Keystone who would form our first Educator Development Group (EDG). This group met consistently over a period of three years, reviewing each theme of SRV with an eye to teaching and using the ideas in that theme, completing and working on a Personal Development Plan, developing and leading informal study groups, and developing presentation and facilitation skills. Several years later, another group of participants was identified and invited to be part of the second EDG. These individuals were asked to be part of the

group because they had attended numerous KI events, shown enthusiasm for the ideas, voiced a willingness to learn more, possessed competencies that are important for leaders to have, and, most importantly, were passionate about assisting the people KHS serves to have a better life. These participants completed the Educator Development Curriculum and joined with the first group to become the SRV Leadership Group for the organization. As the third group of potential SRV educators begins their development, the Leadership Group continues to work within their agencies to be a resource for SRV, to provide teaching and education, and to use the ideas in their work. Throughout this process of finding and fortifying leaders we have used mentoring. The KI staff, other knowledgeable people from outside the KI, and the members of the leadership group all act as mentors to others. This has proven to be a wonderful way to fortify leaders.

We have defined leadership broadly, to include both formal and informal leaders with the organization. We are working to develop both leaders who can teach and leaders who can implement what is taught by the KI. We do not expect that every 'leader' will be able to do everything, but rather work with each person to assist him/her to identify personal strengths, interests, gifts, and desired roles, and then we assist each person to develop a plan which will provide the opportunities to develop the competencies needed to fill the role(s) which the person desires. The SRV leadership group is diverse and includes people who have various roles in the organization, e.g., direct support employees, executive directors, and those who work in clinical positions. As well, participants in the leadership group include people who work with children, adults, and families in a variety of services, e.g., mental health, developmental disabilities, foster care, family-based support, and preschool services.

The SRV Leadership Group has developed into an important structure within Keystone in a number of ways. These leaders serve as resources for the

agencies and programs they work in by teaching SRV concepts in any number of ways, provoking and facilitating implementation, and being a Social Role Valorization resource to those around them. As well, the SRV leaders have become important sources of strength for each other and others struggling to use the ideas in what can be difficult circumstances.

Identifying Fertile Ground for the Use of SRV Concepts

TRYING TO TEACH, USE AND APPLY the ideas broadly across a huge service system is a daunting task. Early efforts to systematize and impose requirements for agency participation were, perhaps predictably, ineffective. Part of the reason for this is that different parts of the organization were more receptive, had deeper commitments to using SRV ideas in their work, were in differing stages of development, had greater leadership depth, and more flexibility in making change. In other areas, we encountered resistance and lack of focus in efforts to train the workforce and then support the use of the ideas in the actual services. Over time, we focused our efforts on finding parts of the organization and groups of people who are receptive, and working on a small scale within those areas. This strategy has been much more successful, and we have found largely enthusiastic and positive responses from most participants over the past few years.

Creating Spaces & Places for Discussion, Planning, & Learning Beyond the Workshops

OUR TRAINING SCHEDULE HAS INCLUDED several three-day Introductory SRV courses provided several times each year, and most service areas within the organization require or at least encourage their staff to attend. Because of this, most of our courses are filled to capacity, with waiting lists. This means that we have a large number of staff attending formal training events. As we looked at this, we realized that for many of these attendees, there is a real need to follow-up, to provoke their

thinking, to give them opportunities to talk about what they have learned and how they will use it. Without this, people often leave the workshop quite inspired and ready to make change, but their passion and energy is not maintained, and even their knowledge of the ideas seemed to fade soon after attending. As well, efforts to make change are often not supported by coworkers, supervisors, and some families, which cause the workshop attendees to become discouraged and disillusioned.

Therefore, we decided to provide forums for people to discuss and think about the ideas that are taught in the workshops in informal ways. We wanted to give people across the organization that had been to the formal workshop and were keen to use the ideas within their programs the opportunity to network with others trying to use the ideas, to build alliances, and to share strategies that have worked. The first and perhaps most successful method for this was the development of the SRV Study Groups. These are two-hour sessions focused on topics developed and facilitated by members of the SRV Leadership Group. The sessions are open to all 'SRV Graduates,' and have been interesting, lively, intimate learning events which blend our most seasoned, impassioned workers with new and emerging staff who responded positively to the ideas in the workshop. The titles have included such interesting fare as, "When Is It a Wretched Compromise and When Is It Simply Wrong?" and "Inclusion: It's More Than Just Showing Up."

A web-based bulletin board has provided another forum for discussion, and this has had some value and some success. Establishing topic areas such as teaching tips and strategies, current service practices and commentary, positive examples of people moving into valued social roles and the results, questions and discussion, follow-up from PASSING workshops, and others formed the structure for this effort. At times, the board has been used extensively and successfully. However, we have found that it requires a great deal of monitoring and care to keep it active.

Lessons & Learning

THE FOLLOWING ARE LESSONS WE have discerned from our efforts to date.

Our Ambitious Agenda May Have Been Too Ambitious

OUR INITIAL THOUGHTS AND PLANNING sessions included many plans and procedures to be instituted and applied broadly across the organization. These included the following:

- The development of consistent, specific training requirements in SRV and PASS-ING for each position in the organization.
- The development of an SRV Mastery Program, where each employee must maintain a particular 'level' of educational attainment through completion of a core curriculum and annual continuing education.
- The development of an annual 'web-based' refresher course/exam to be completed annually by each 'SRV Graduate.'
- The development of a 'credentialing,' or SRV mastery program, for management and leadership.
- Work in partnership with human resources (HR) departments to design work processes that reflect the organizational focus on Social Role Valorization. For example, we have encouraged the development of HR processes which clearly lay out the expectation that service workers need to learn about Social Role Valorization and implement it in the lives of the people served by KHS. As well, we have asked HR departments to look at key HR processes such as job announcements, interviews, position descriptions, staff evaluation, the matching processes between service workers and the person they will serve, to see if these processes are consistent with SRV so that positive mindsets are created.
- To impact on the agency culture to such an extent that staff (both supervisors and direct support workers) will consciously think about and evaluate the match between what they are doing in their work and what should be done for the people served from an SRV perspective.
- To encourage professional clinical staff to learn more about SRV and its use in clinical services.

THESE AMBITIOUS PLANS HAVE PROVED to be exceedingly difficult to implement consistently across such a large group of related organizations. Even quite extensive efforts have often resulted in enormous commitments of time and energy to track, train, and monitor across a workforce of 2500, and across multiple agencies, with little sustained progress and long-term impact on the lives of people served. Across agencies, and even within individual agencies, we discovered a range of receptivity to Social Role Valorization and related ideas. Organizational history, culture, and leadership seem to drive the depth of receptivity to the ideas, as well as the commitment to use the ideas to help the people served to have access to the good life (cf. Wolfensberger, Thomas, & Caruso, 1996). Hence, our focus over the years has changed. Rather than think in terms of making a topdown impact agency-wide, we scaled down and looked for those fertile areas where we could make the most progress—where we thought the most fruit would come forth.

For example, we have worked with several agencies within KHS who have identified SRV leaders (drawn from the Leadership Group) to lead the efforts for change, and this has proven to be very successful. Another example of this strategy has been to develop connections with other major initiatives within the organization that have sought us out to assist them to weave SRV into their efforts. One of the most successful examples of this is in the KHS-wide quality enhancement processes. Concepts such as individualization, effectiveness, the developmental model, and the culturally valued analogue have been identified as major areas around which service quality will be assessed

at KHS. Since these ideas are drawn from SRV, we have worked to help staff understand them within the context of their organizational cultures and across a whole range of services. Consultation with individual services, and departments as diverse as community relations and information technology, have proven to be helpful and useful.

Do Not Judge Who You Think Will/Will Not Be Receptive to the Ideas

OFTEN WE HAVE HEARD THAT direct support staff do not really benefit from attending an SRV presentation, yet we have found, and perhaps not surprisingly, that it seems that the efforts which have been the most fruitful have been those which have taken place closest to the people served. This has included working with agency staff who know the people they serve well and care deeply about their welfare. In many instances, these people have been found in some unexpected places.

Some of the most positive responses to the ideas have been found in some of the least likely places: in the oldest service models, where larger groups of people are served together, and where systemic change may be the hardest to effect. Perhaps because people working in these settings can see most clearly the changes that need to happen. SRV has provided a strong foundation for their work, and has inspired them to work with effective tools and a positive ideology towards individual change.

The 'Silk Flower' Effect is Difficult to Overcome

SILK FLOWERS ARE OFTEN BEAUTIFUL, indeed much more beautiful than plastic flowers, but they are simply not the real thing. This effect can clearly be seen in services such as KHS, where there has been exposure to the ideas of normalization and SRV throughout the history of the organization. Predictably in such a situation, the easiest things to do, such as having beautiful physical places for people to live, a stated focus on assisting people to become part of their communities, etc. are very present in the organization. Yet many of the

things that are needed to help people truly have full and good lives have yet to be addressed in the ways they need to be. For example, many people served by KHS do participate in some ways in their communities, but many fewer people really have valued social roles in their communities. So in a way they have silk flowers—nice activities, perhaps better than what is done in some other human service organizations, but still not the real thing—not a rich full, meaningful life with many valued social roles. We have found that in an environment where the more surface things to do are done well; it is difficult to help people see that there is much more that can be done.

People (staff, families, and even some of the people served) tend to think that services are the best that they can be and that indeed KHS 'has arrived' so to speak. We have heard "but we are so much better than the other agencies." We have worked diligently to give credit where credit is due, but also to assist people to see beyond the veneer and challenge themselves to think about what could be better.

High Value in Being Able to Offer Core Events in a Sequenced Way to Build Competency

As MENTIONED ABOVE, the KI works hard to offer a sequence of core events that aim at assisting participants to develop competency. This has proven to be very effective. We generally encourage people to get a foundation in SRV theory and then move on to the 'implementation workshops.' This allows for building of people's understanding over time. As well, after each educational event, participants are encouraged to take the ideas they were exposed to and relate them to their work. Often they come to the next event with lots of questions and are prepared to learn more and deepen the knowledge they already have gained.

Flexibility in Our Approach to Education is Necessary

WHILE WE DO HAVE A set schedule (a template of sorts) of educational events that are offered each

year, we also have learned that it is important to be flexible in our educational efforts and offerings. As we work with agencies, listen to the struggles, as well as the hopes, we develop learning opportunities that will be responsive to the needs of the staff that are supporting the people served by KHS. The model coherency process has been very instrumental in our efforts to design these opportunities. For example, we have seen from our work with KHS agencies and talking with staff the confusion that exists around the direct support staff role, so we have developed specific opportunities for people to get together and learn about the role. Another example is the retreat series that the KI offers. This series is intended to assist people to come together and reflect on topics such as the gifts that people bring to their work, the connection between organizational and personal values, the role of community and culture in services, and the foundation upon which people's desire to serve is based.

An Individualized Approach to Leadership Development Serves Everyone Well

WE HAVE DESCRIBED THE PROCESS we have in place for identifying and fortifying leaders. This is a very individualized process. For example, each person meets with a mentor who assists him/her to reflect on experiences, personal gifts, talents, competencies, hopes, aspirations, etc., and then each person writes a Personal Development Plan. This plan takes into account all of the above, and the recommended learning experiences, challenges, etc. are very individualized. The mentoring process is also much tailored to each individual, and happens in both formal and informal ways. This approach has attracted some people who otherwise might not have gotten involved (e.g., people who have lots of experience and consider themselves to be experts, and young people who are anxious for big challenges and impatient with lots of bureaucracy).

Conclusion

WE ARE SURE THAT THERE is other learning that we have either overlooked in this paper or have not yet noticed, but we humbly present these to you in the hope that they will provoke thought and conversation, which will in turn lead to increased fruitfulness in the teaching and implementation of SRV for all of us.

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ENDNOTE

1. The Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agentry (Syracuse University) was

founded by Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger. For more information about its work and training schedule, contact the Training Institute at: 800 South Wilbur Avenue, Suite 3B1, Syracuse, NY 13204 USA; 315.473.2978.

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