MANAGEMENT

ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES: BURN-OUT PREVENTION

—by Marilyn Strachan Peterson

U.S. corporations are more cognizant than ever about employees as resources to be developed and nurtured. Heavily influenced by Tom Peters's books, *In Search of Excellence* and *Thriving on Chaos*, the business section of the daily newspaper is full of articles describing the relationship between organizational culture and employee satisfaction and effectiveness.

Unfortunately, public sector managers have been slow to acknowledge and act on the well-established fact that organizational culture largely determines employee morale. The common view of social service employees as endless platoons of soldiers sent into the trenches of the child protection system exacerbates already high turnover rates. Taking steps to reduce the turnover rate is a service not only to employees, who deserve the same level of caring as the children they serve, but to the children needing protection. With turnover so high, children's needs are being evaluated by inexperienced workers, who many times take their cues from unseasoned supervisors.

Public sector managers need to take a lesson from their private sector counterparts, and devise ways to adjust the system they manage to the people working within it, rather than expecting employees to adjust to the system. Assessing and changing an agency's organizational culture takes time out of schedules that are already crammed. But in the long run it saves time that might be spent in damage control—counseling staff distressed by difficult working conditions, replacing staff who leave, training new staff, supervising inexperienced supervisors, and the like.

The phrase, "organizational culture," refers to the internal experience of the organization, an experience determined by a number of dynamic, interactive factors. The acronym below might help managers remember all of these important factors.

C Communication
U Underlying assumptions
L Layout
T Tasks
U Unfolding
R Realism
Relationships
E Effectiveness
Employee needs

Communication refers to the level of openness and honesty between staff and management.

Underlying assumptions are agency and staff attitudes about the rationale for the work, the importance of the organization to the community, and the value of employees (expendable or essential).

Layout refers to the physical environment—whether it exhibits a "make do," "get it done without resources" attitude or a commitment to support employees with a comfortable workplace and adequate resources to perform the job.

Tasks are the primary and secondary responsibilities of management. "Primary" tasks are those involved in running the organization; these generally get the lion's share of every manager's attention. "Secondary" tasks, often overlooked but equally important, are those directed toward integrating organizational demands and employees' human needs.

Unfolding characterizes the organization's culture, which is dynamic, interactive, and evolving.

Realism should characterize the agency's mission, goals, and expectations of employees. **Relationships** highlights the quality of the interaction between employees and between agencies.

Effectiveness concerns both the individual's and the agency's productivity. **Employee needs** encompass fundamental desires for satisfaction, affiliation, validation, and recognition.

All of these factors must be taken into consideration in the effort to develop a positive organizational culture. Managers have to commit themselves to active evaluation and planning in all of these areas and, if necessary, to dismantling a negative culture. Five steps will take managers a long way toward developing the positive organizational culture they want.

1. Assess the health status of the organization. This means assessing both the level of stress and the organization's means of addressing it. Is stress constantly high, medium, or low? Does the level of stress fluctuate? Does it fluctuate predictably or unpredictably? How well does the organization respond to the levels of stress experienced by its employees? Are any mechanisms to help people cope built into daily operations? Do any policies worsen the stress employees feel?

A sure sign that the organization is not responding well to work-related stress is unhappy employees. Symptoms of dysfunction include low morale; scapegoated, angry, and frustrated workers; mistrust and lack of cooperation among workers; employees coming late, leaving early, disappearing during the day; high turnover; loss of creativity; frequent expressions of doubt by employees that they are competent to handle the work.

Surveying all of the factors outlined above, identify problem areas—areas in which the organization is not functioning optimally. Consult with other managers (peers and upper management) to determine what can be done to ameliorate the situation. Address problems that can be changed or modified immediately, and develop long-range strategies for intractable problems. Inform employees that this process is going on, and involve them in problem-solving at every opportunity.

2. Address the causes of job stress. Four major factors contributing to job stress were identified in a research study as follows (Frost, Mitchell, and Nord, 1986): (a) job ambiguity—35% of respondents reported lack of clarity about the scope and responsibility of their work; (b) job conflict—48% described conflicting demands and priorities; (c) job overload—45% reported having more to do than they could accomplish; (d) lack of completion or resolution—47% experienced frustration over problems and issues that constantly recur because they are unresolved.

To address these problems, you need to clarify the organization's objectives, bring them within reasonable bounds, and communicate them clearly to employees. Are the mission and goals realistic? Do they match resources? Are objectives known to all and prioritized? If new projects or services are added, are prior objectives and expectations re-prioritized? Are such changes known to everyone? Are expectations of employees reasonable? Are the organizational structure, decision-making authority, and reporting relationships clear? If answers to these diagnostic questions are negative, take the necessary steps to improve practice.

Review and compare job descriptions to employee reports of what they do in an average week. Resolve discrepancies so employees know that what they are doing is in fact what is expected of them. Review established procedures to determine if they can be streamlined. Develop action plans to address issues and problems, and keep employees informed about progress towards resolution as well as about obstacles and setbacks.

3. People experience the most stress when they are isolated. Encourage camaraderie and the development of a common base of experience through informal and formal group activities such as team meetings, special projects, trainings, shared meals, and sports. Promote informal consultation, problem-solving and decision-making to both reduce the burden on individual employees and to encourage the creation of new approaches and alternatives.

To create an environment in which employees feel valued and their work is recognized, articulate for employees the difficulties involved in the work and the importance of doing it. Establish and follow traditions like collectively observing birthdays and holidays. Celebrate accomplish-

Continued on next page

PETERSON (continued from page 5)

ments, no matter how small or incremental. Assert and act on the belief that the mental health and personal effectiveness of employees are as important as the needs of the population served. Involve employees in planning and implementing activities that will make them feel supported and appreciated. Build intra-agency support systems as well, so that employees feel part of a broader network of professionals striving to serve the target population.

4. All professions involve some degree of stress, but working with abused and neglected children can be particularly hazardous to the emotional health of professionals, who daily confront the dark side of human nature. The stress associated with this field of work should not be minimized as "business as usual." To provide employees with adequate support, create organizational assumptions about the difficulty of the work and the value of the people who do it. Organizational assumptions are generally not put in writing, though they can be; they are the agency's spoken and unspoken values about its work and employees.

At University of California (Davis) Child Protection Center, nurse practitioners were distressed because they did not know what happened to the majority of the children they examined. At issue was whether or not their work was effective. In response to this need for affirmation, management and staff asserted a new, positive organizational assumption: that a child-friendly environment staffed with professionals skilled in working with children positively touched the child's life, no matter how brief the visit. While nurse practitioners are still curious about outcomes of individual cases, the underlying fear that their work was insignificant in the children's lives was alleviated.

5. As a manager, espouse and model for employees the value of a balanced life. Separate work from your personal life. Balance work and leisure. Take lunch breaks. Develop absorbing interests outside the field. Acknowledge and support both staff and management's need to leave clients and problems behind when the day is done. Draw attention to these ways of taking care of yourself, and encourage employees to do the same.

Building a positive culture is a shared undertaking between staff and management, requiring clear communication and continued commitment. Group spirit ebbs and flows: gains may lead to consistently good morale for several months that, later, begins to unravel. The unravelling is a sign not of failure, but of the need to reassess needs and rethink strategies for meeting them. Regular attention to organizational issues and mutual support and responsibility between administration and staff ensures the evolution of a positive organizational structure that nourishes and rewards professionals in this extremely difficult field.

References

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PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE

WORKING WITH LAWYERS

—by Lucy Berliner

A shift has taken place in the focus of concern in legal cases involving children as victims and witnesses, a shift that can dramatically heighten interviewers' stress levels. In the old days, the children were the targets. They were portrayed as prone to lying about victimization for attention or revenge. Defense attorneys claimed that children, especially young children, were unreliable reporters of events because they have difficulty distinguishing real from imagined experiences, or because they are highly suggestible.

But now, in part because concerted investigation has established that children are generally reliable witnesses and rarely lie about abuse experiences (see, e.g., "*Fighting Harpers*," p. 8), attention has largely shifted away from the children's capabilities and motivations and onto the interviewer's capabilities and motivations. I think this reflects a positive change in the social climate regarding children who may have been abused. There is now widespread recognition that children are commonly victimized, and a growing consensus that our disbelief of child witnesses has allowed offenders to victimize children with impunity. That children who report abuse are far more likely to be viewed sympathetically and given the benefit of the doubt is a very substantial improvement in attitudes toward children.

For the professionals who interview abused children, however, this shift is a new source of stress. With improper interviewing now often considered the primary source of unreliable or false information from children, interviewers may find their every move attacked in court. As a community, we have tended to respond to this attack with confusion and distress. Some interviewers are virtually paralyzed, reluctant to ask any questions for fear of ruining a case; others give up on accomodating their technique to the legal system, feeling that they have to choose between providing effective therapy and providing reliable evidence of abuse; others adhere to rigid, attorney-generated lists of do's and don't's that may hamstring their ability to be helpful to children.

The problem is not going to go away. Our adversary system requires that the testimony of complaining witnesses be discredited. Defense attorneys will never stop trying to impeach opposing witnesses. They can't, they won't, and they shouldn't. They are acting properly. We can't rid ourselves of the problem, but we can respond constructively in several ways.

First, we can keep our own house in order. We should not give the lawyers and experts good reason to challenge our work. True, much of the criticism raised against interviewers is unwarranted and unfair. The accusations that child abuse professionals are fortune-seeking, psychologically disturbed, or unconcerned with the truth are patently absurd. But some of the concerns defense attorneys raise are quite legitimate. Examples abound of interviewers using approaches which are clearly inappropriate, leading, suggestive, or coercive. As a professional group, we should give defense lawyers and experts no legitimate grounds for attacking our practice.

We need to be certain that we and our colleagues are thoroughly familiar with the body of knowledge that does exist regarding interviewing techniques, children's suggestibility, and the reliability of the evidence children give. Those professionals who have state-granted authority to conduct investigations and invoke legal interventions—CPS workers, law enforcement investigators—as state-identified officials are particularly responsible for knowing this work. But all child interviewers should be conscientious, careful, meticulous record-keepers, well-read in the literature in the field, and prepared to explain and defend their interview process. Each interviewer whose technique is not thoroughly informed by the available information hurts the credibility of everyone in the field; each conscientious, highly professional interviewer improves the field as a whole.

Second, we must stop changing our practice to accomodate unfounded or unsupported claims by defense lawyers and their cadre of expert witnesses. We and researchers must be the ones who determine what is good and what is bad interviewing technique. Using rigid, attorney-generated interviewing protocols and long lists of do's and don't's isn't cooperating—it's conceding. Before we follow their rules, we must see evidence that, for instance, a reliable report from a child can only be produced when an interviewer has no prior knowledge, asks no specific questions, and is not friendly and supportive.

Continued on next page