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Reinventing professional development

Spectrum Health Systems develops model approach, takes it nationwide **BY ROMAS BUIVYDAS, SUSAN MOITZO, STACY FLANAGAN, EARL WARREN, MICHAEL STUART, AND KENDRA MARIEN**

With substance abuse services today facing an array of complex challenges, including diverse client populations, a range of new evidence-based practices, and rigorous supervision, certification, and licensing standards, it is clear that clinical staff must continue to develop new professional knowledge.¹

Professional development, which has traditionally been provided to clinicians through periodic in-service training by visiting consultants or experts, is often lamented in professional literature. Experts assert that this “workshop” approach lacks continuity and coherence and fails to appreciate the complexity of clinical, supervisory, or managerial work.²

Since the early 1990s, many have advocated an alternative to the workshop model of professional staff development. They maintain that, in order for the development activity to truly matter, it should:

- Be conducted in a more active manner that engages all participants;
- Allow for free exchange of ideas; and
- Use subject matter that is clearly connected to clinical and service improvement goals.

Proponents highlight the need for:

- Collaborative learning, seen in contexts such as the development of surveys involving training needs or topics;
- Engagement in instruction tasks, such as interactive case studies;
- Additional, detailed exploration of subject matter; and
- Consistent, post-development feedback and ongoing follow-up activities.

According to these experts, the value of “top down” training seminars or work-



shops can be outweighed by a focused, but purposeful menu of clinical conferences, pro-active as well as responsive trainings, partnerships with colleges and universities, clinical staff feedback, online-learning activities, and professional development projects.³

In 2007, Spectrum Health Systems (Worcester, Mass.), a multi-state non-profit substance abuse and mental health services agency, undertook an initiative to re-create its professional development programs.

The initiative began with formation of a steering committee—the Spectrum University of Professionalism, Education, and Research (SUPER)—consisting of senior-level clinical, business, and administrative leaders. The SUPER committee’s overall goals for the development initiative were to enhance care and treatment of Spectrum clients, establish Spectrum as a staff development leader in the fields

of mental health and substance abuse treatment, and foster high levels of job satisfaction among professional staff. SUPER’s first task was to collaborate in building improved professional development programs in Spectrum’s home state, Massachusetts, and then extend the new model organization-wide to replace isolated local efforts.

In 2007, components of this SUPER program included:

- Monthly training sessions, open to all New England employees, built around topics identified through employee surveys and requests or based on best practices in evidence-based treatment. Participating employees received contact hours and/or continuing education units relevant to their professional disciplines.
- A partnership with Westfield State University, funded by a Commonwealth of Massachusetts workforce training grant, which is now preparing up to 20 full-time, unlicensed Spectrum clinical employees for LADC and CADAC credentialing. This comprehensive, 18-month program, which extends from June 2009 through December 2010, offers participants six nine-week courses and a six-month practicum to build knowledge and skills directly related to their field of work.
- An LADC III licensure assistance program, also open to unlicensed employees as a “stepping stone” to career progress. This level of licensure does not require a full educational program, but rather completion of a comprehensive application and written examination. Spectrum supported this program by: communicating the opportunity to employees; offering no-cost training sessions about the process, skills, and knowledge required to complete the application and licensure requirements; and reimbursing employees for license application and examination fees. Fourteen employees took advantage.

- An educational partnership with Worcester State College's Next Step program, a continuing education program for undergraduate health and behavioral health professionals, that involves several elements:
 - o A two-semester, 30-credit Portfolio class, which challenges students to create a portfolio of "learning through life experience."
 - o Next Step classes held at Spectrum sites, including Drugs and Society and Co-Occurring Disorders.
 - o Spectrum-sponsored presentations of SUPER-developed professional development programs at Worcester State College. Company sponsor fees paid to the college contribute to a scholarship account that benefits Spectrum staff, who may apply for tuition scholarships of up to 90 percent. Typically, these scholarships benefit employees involved in the Portfolio class, or employees who are first-time college students.

Spectrum's SUPER committee extended its development programs in 2008 by:

- Introducing a new benefit to pre-pay tuition for employees pursuing education and licensure as substance abuse counselors or nurses. This program not only supports staff development, but improves retention since staff members commit to 24 months of continued service to Spectrum upon program completion.
- Developing and implementing local conferences for Spectrum's New England-based employees, outside providers, and consumers of substance abuse and mental health treatment services, including:
 - o An annual Women's Treatment Conference, inaugurated in April 2008, that features speakers and activities focused around the needs of women in treatment. The conference's success has been expanded and continues annually under the direction of the agency's Women's Services committee (established in 2006).
 - o Regional professional conferences, starting in 2009, to provide professional growth, collaboration, and networking opportunities around a program featuring state, regional, and national speakers.

Table 1. Exit interview results, growth and development

Statement	2006	2008	Change (2006-08)
"The training I received upon hire prepared me for my job."	3.41	3.94	+15.54 percent
"I received adequate training on an ongoing basis."	3.52	4.20	+19.31 percent

Note: 2009 results not reported.

Table 2. Employee job satisfaction survey (Massachusetts only)

Respondent group	2006	2008	2009	Change 06-09, in percent	Change 08-09, in percent
Adolescent Division employees	N/A	3.57	4.34		+21.56
Inpatient Division employees	3.76	4.04	4.21	+11.96	+3.47
Outpatient Division employees	3.78	3.90	4.16	+10.05	+6.67
Correctional Division employees	4.13	3.84	3.76		-2.08

Interestingly, an initial review of exit interview data from Massachusetts-based Spectrum employees who resigned on positive terms and agreed to participate revealed significant findings with regard to professional growth and development during employment. In these exit interviews, employees were asked to indicate their level of agreement with two statements, based on a 1 to 5 scale. Table 1 reflects the findings.

Job satisfaction survey data also showed improvement, although not as significant overall as the exit interview data. The survey, shown in Table 2, was also based on a 1 to 5 scale. The only decreased job satisfaction score occurred in the Correctional Division. This may be due to state budget and program cuts that occurred during the same time period, though further study is required.

Encouraged by these results in Massachusetts, Spectrum's SUPER committee extended its new professional development initiative to all U.S. states where the company operates. The committee is now working with the company's state directors, as well as new state steering committees, to replicate the initiative in Maryland, Tennessee, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Rhode Island, and Washington, respectively.

In 2010, Spectrum contracted with a Web-based training design company to implement real-time and pre-recorded training modules covering a wide range of regulatory and clinical topics. These modules provide continuing education units accepted by most licensing and credentialing

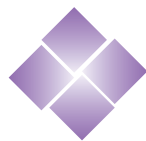
agencies. The training software package, which enables managers to create personalized training programs for each employee, also alerts employees about upcoming training appointments and their managers as each assigned module is completed. The program is already credited with reducing travel time and reimbursement expenses associated with offsite training and with minimizing direct service time lost to training activities.

Though no organization can predict the future, any organization can help to shape it through a strong program of professional staff training and development. We invite and challenge organizations to create their own strategies and initiatives for development, then use them to realize a promising future. ■

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