

# Creating, Leading and Sustaining a Culture Centered in Recovery and Resilience

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## Part One: Creating a recovery culture



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***“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.”***

I wrote the above statement 16 years ago. The back story goes something like this: I was searching for approaches to changing the culture of our own peer-run organization in ways that would support the recovery of people who used our services. I read a few books about changing cultures and they all seemed to make

sense. However, when I tried to apply the academic concepts, I quickly lost interest and also lost my way on what I hoped would be a path to inspiring insights and aha moments. So I decided to just take deep dives into a variety of organizations, sort of a modified ethnographic plunge, and see what I could discover.

My first attempts had to do with “observation.” I thought if I watched the daily operations of an organization, I would be able to detect the underlying cultural patterns. I asked myself, “Where IS the culture? Where does it live?” “*Culture*” seemed like a thin coat of dust that covered everything in the organization.

Surely the roots of an organization’s culture went deeper than what was held in the dusty policy manuals that nobody reads unless the auditors are approaching. But I looked there anyway and I waded through lots of policy manuals, it was a futile effort. I don’t recommend this – there was no enlightenment to be found there in terms of cultural “roots.”

My next stop was to look at the vision and mission statements of various organizations. I thought for sure I could get a glimpse of the origins of culture in these statements.

I guess I wasn’t too surprised to learn that ***there was often a huge gap between what an organization says about themselves, and what they actually do.*** That “gap” said something about the culture, but I didn’t have enough clues yet to determine just how to read it.

While I didn’t come away from my search with the answers I had hoped to find, I did learn a lot about how powerful and elusive the *culture* of any organization was. Even though I still couldn’t describe it or find its roots yet, I at least knew what and where it wasn’t.

I turned my attention back to our own organization. The year was 1999. We didn’t know what we’d turn out like when we began this journey. We didn’t have a roadmap, and there were no breadcrumbs scattered along the path by others who had gone before us. We just knew that if we were going to create opportunities for people to recover, we needed to change our culture.

We knew enough to start with our mission statement, which had been written many years earlier: “To be the premiere provider of crisis stabilization services.” This statement seemed OK to us until we looked at it through the *eyes of recovery*. When we did this, it seemed to be way off. It was not a statement that we could use to guide us toward transformation to a recovery culture.

Our CEO, who had written this statement several years earlier, looked at it, squinted, and said “Yuck! ***This is all about us being a great provider. Instead, it should be about the people who use our services, and how we can help them in their recovery.***” We all agreed and started the rewriting process.

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It took us a while to figure out that ***who and how we were being*** was at least as important as what we were doing. If our attitudes were misaligned with recovery values, we wouldn’t be able to sustain the effort necessary to change our culture. By now it was clear to us that this change wasn’t just a matter of developing new recovery-based policies and practices for the organization. It wasn’t about painting the walls and planting new shrubs. Each one of us needed to be willing to learn a new way of being that emulated the values of recovery.

We were beginning to realize that we needed to be inspired and revitalized by our values instead of being driven by rules and regulations. Yes, we had to live within the confines of the rules, but if rules and regulations became our vision and our focus, we’d be trying to put “new wine into old wineskins” which would severely limit our ability to create a new way of being. ***We needed to have the courage to step beyond what was known and familiar and move into new territory if we were going to create a culture that would sustain our vision of recovery.***

Staying focused on our values without being distracted by our old ways of being was more of a challenge than you might think. Our existing list of values didn’t begin to provide us with the inspiration or direction we needed to travel into uncharted territory. We needed to create new ones that reflected what we hoped to grow into as we transformed our culture and ourselves. We finally came up with a set of values and a vision and mission statement we could reliably use to guide our progress toward the development of a recovery culture.

Our initial goal was to transform the services we were providing in ways that would fundamentally help people recover. Frankly, we were naive enough to think this was all we needed to do to establish a recovery culture. ***If we'd known at the time how much our organization needed to change, and how much we ourselves would need to change, we probably would have given it a lot more thought before jumping in... but we would have jumped in just the same.***

We continually asked ourselves “if we are a recovering organization, how would we do this, or that?” We took a close look at how we were treating the people who used our services; the language we used to describe them and the expectations we had for them.

***The tipping point came into view when we hired some people with lived experience in mental health, addiction and trauma-related challenges 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.

Tweaking a few things would not create a recovery culture. 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 culture in our 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 with this culture stuff. 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 the culture of our organization, our immediate focus shifted from the mundane to more meaningful points of reference. Yes, we still needed to make sure the cogs in the various wheels lined up; the paperwork completed and the bills paid; but it was not our main focus anymore. ***Instead we paid 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 a safe ground – a place where we can risk not knowing, and then growing; rich soil to support the growth of a creative culture. Once this groundwork has been laid, it’s time to pick up speed.

Most organizations have a closet where they keep their shadows, and our closet was in the large crisis programs we managed. 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.

By now we had created the bones of a culture change, 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. What if we get hurt? What if we get a licensing citation? What if our insurance premiums go up?” We now know that stepping over that “reasonableness” line is a key part of changing a culture.

Some staff left because they couldn’t imagine living through this big of a change. They were comfortable with the old way even though it didn’t work very well. At this point we had peers on our workforce and they were watching and coaching us. With their support we proceeded with the ‘unreasonable goals’ and were able to eliminate all seclusion and restraint in our facilities.

Once the decks have been cleared there is space to do new things. The temptation may be to start filling that space with old familiar stuff because we aren’t sure what else to do. We may also be so proud of our accomplishments that we think it’s time to kick back, rest on our laurels, and be poised to accept compliments for our efforts. No, this is just the beginning. There is a lot more work to do to create meaningful and lasting culture change.

Change, especially culture change, is not easy, but the payoff is more than worth it. Still, you may 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.”
- “Any 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, you can start looking for your own recovery pathway.

We'll continue this conversation in Part Two of this series on culture change. One of the first things we'll do is describe the pathways that we developed and used in our programs. This will give you a better idea of how to structure your own pathways.

Next up, we will take a close look at the type of leadership that is most effective in moving an organization forward into culture change. Part Two will also bring into focus the leadership contribution of all of those involved. It will also shed some light on the topics we've already covered by describing how to move from ideas into action.

**See you in Part Two.**

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