

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

By Lori Ashcraft, Crestwood Behavioral Health with contributions by Harvey Rosenthal and Madeline Kennedy, The Alliance for Rights and Recovery, formerly known as the New York Association for Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services (NYAPRS)

Part Two: Creating a Recovery Culture Through Conscious Leadership



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Let's begin this discussion by taking an honest look at how people become leaders in organizations that serve people who live with mental health, addiction and trauma-related challenges.

Most of us who ascend to leadership positions don't receive much training or mentoring in how to lead in a way that creates meaningful recovery outcomes. We did our last job well, so we got promoted. Now here we are telling other people how to do their jobs. We join the ranks of official leaders in the organization and we bumble around with the other leaders and try to keep things on track. We think our job is about making sure everyone is doing what they are supposed to do and keeping the machinery running.

This becomes our focus, and we measure our success on how well we do these superficial things. We pretend that this is as good as it gets. This can go on for years. The whole time we are missing the point of growing ourselves and those

who report to us into committed, skilled, accountable, and caring people. I know this territory well from firsthand experience because at one time I too was caught up in this trap.

These opening paragraphs may seem a little harsh. In fact, my first thought about writing this article was to open it with a nice gentle nuanced approach so as not to offend anyone. My second thought was to just shoot straight, believing we are capable of digesting a painfully straightforward assessment of where we stand in the world of recovery leadership. I think we're ready, right from the "git go," to take an honest look at where we are so we can figure out how to take on new territory as recovery leaders.

With a recovery mindset, we can make important contributions by transforming the "everyday" into the magic that happens when people, both staff and people being served, recognize their human potential and the ways they can creatively contribute. Remember, this happens when the leader focuses on the organisms; the people – that's where the heart beats.

Let's approach developing recovery leadership skills from two different angles: the first focuses on *Being* and the second on *Doing*.

Being is mostly internal and *Doing* is mostly external.

- *Being* (internal) centers on the ideal personal characteristics of a leader who can create a recovery culture. These are characteristics of any good leader, no matter what the organization is or what the mission is. We just need to apply them to the culture of recovery and think about how they can be effective in our context.
- *Doing* (external action) relies on a strong well-articulated *vision* that guides the organization. The leader holds the vision up above the crowd to constantly remind everyone about the mission of the organization. It becomes the lens through which the work is viewed. A meaningful vision is not just a "point of view" but a "viewing point" that provides perspective for each moment as well as a long-range observation of the journey. Holding high this living, dynamic, and dual focused vision allows leaders the space to continually learn how to inspire and empower the staff; generate choices

and options; and role model courage and guts and integrity in a way that moves the entire organization toward a recovery culture.

Leaders who hold a living, dynamic, and dual focused vision emulate recovery values in their actions and attitudes. They reinforce those values and demonstrate how to put recovery principles into action. This gives staff a living example of what it looks like in action and makes it easier for them to emulate it in their own relationships with people who are receiving services from the organization.

I’ve synthesized these principles in the chart below to make it easier to keep in mind both the *Being* and *Doing* aspects of a recovery leadership *vision*.

Being and Doing: Recovery Leadership Practice

Recovery Leadership ways of being (internal)	Recovery Leadership ways of doing (external action)	Reinforces a vision that supports a recovery culture
Commitment to being <u>present</u>	Shows up and comes out of the “black hole of supervision” to be where the action is; observes staff performance and provides regular feedback; inspects what is expected; catches people doing the right things as well as doing things right	Visibility of recovery principals put into action is proof that the vision is real
Fixed focus on <u>recovery outcomes</u>	Measures outcomes; seeks solutions and celebrates success	Continually communicates a connection to the “why” and “how” we are doing this work; serves as the “voice of the vision” for the organization
Has a spirit to <u>inspire</u>	Calls staff and people served to their personal best; inspires so others aspire	Conveys and portrays the sacredness of service
Strength to be <u>vulnerable</u>	Does not abuse power, gives up the need to be right; willing to admit mistakes; non-defensive and open to suggestions	Role-modeling openness and collaboration, invites participation
Flexibility to be <u>agile</u>	Modifies plans quickly when things change; moves gracefully through challenges; takes advantage of new opportunities;	Keeps the organization alive and pliable enough to maximize opportunities for organizational and individual growth

	makes changes that allow for maximum growth	
Courage to be <u>transparent</u>	Generously and appropriately shares personal feelings and information; openly shares organizational information with employees and customers	Demonstrates trust in others; shows the safety of the culture; role-models a willingness to be seen
Resolve to <u>not give up</u>	Finds new ways to accomplish the mission when obstructions arise; determined to move the organization forward in the face of adversity	Role-models commitment to making things happen when they don't look possible; role-model of accountability
Breadth and depth to be <u>resilient</u>	Does not give up when things get tough; able to bounce back from adversity	Demonstrates the ability to use challenging times as growth experiences
Loving Kindness	Lovingly holding others in deep respect	Maintains an attitude of positivity, generosity and graciousness; creates an empathetic atmosphere
Guts	Courage to move forward through known and unknown territory; bravery to face difficulties and use them as opportunities to learn and grow; feels the fear and does it anyway; willingness to take risks	Demonstrates that it's ok to feel fear, but we can move through fear toward deeper understanding of our response to challenging dynamics

Researcher and author, Brene Brown, sums up what much of this is about: *“Leaders need to have a strong back, a soft front, and a wild heart.”*

It may be helpful to reflect on real-life examples of how a shift to a recovery culture can take place by learning and using recovery leadership principles. So, I'll share some of the experiences we had when we first tried to understand the nuances of creating a recovery culture using some of these recovery leadership principles.

Early on we realized we needed some *guiding lights*, concepts we could turn to that would provide guidance for our ways of being and our actions. We began by conceptualizing our organization as a living body made up of us as organisms. If we were one body, what was our backbone and where were our muscles? We unpacked these two questions by taking a deeper dive into both.

This “deeper dive” resulted in a better understanding of the structures we needed to put in place in order to hold our vision, our ways of being, and the actions we were doing into a living synergistic full-bodied whole. These “guiding lights” made it easier to define and embody recovery values in our daily practices. Without them, we had difficulty articulating a direction and reaffirming a commitment to the mission. They became our backbone. Our muscles put them into action.

Let’s take a look at our *guiding lights* and see how they can be used to propel an organization toward a culture of recovery:

- **Hope:** When leaders are hopeful and expect people to recover, staff can begin to see the potential for this as well. A leader’s hopeful attitude toward staff, focusing on their strengths and potential and coaching them to become their “personal best” is a powerful way to reinforce a recovery culture.
- **Choice:** Leaders need to assure people that there are choices for those being served as well as there are for staff. Giving people choices allows them to begin to think for themselves, becoming more self-determining, and remembering themselves as whole human beings who have an important contribution to make, whether they are a staff person or a person being served by the organization. Having choices allows people to do their own thinking, which produces original ideas and new solutions that benefit the organization. We are clearly in a time when original ideas and innovative solutions are needed against the challenges we are facing, since most existing ideas were not designed to support a recovery culture.

Having choices about what each person puts into their recovery plan is a good example of personal choice. On a broader scale, giving both staff and persons served a voice in the development of programs and procedures helps to build choice at the level of community, which is a key part of community building.

- **Empowerment:** Leaders can create and implement practices and protocols that empower both staff and those being served to believe in themselves and to take personal responsibility for their growth and recovery. We have

created many tools that give staff ways to create empowering situations, including self-directed performance assessments, self-directed recovery plans, debriefing protocols that give equal weight to the voices of both staff and people being served, and many others. When all levels of an organization feel empowered, there is much more energy that can be directed toward fulfilling the mission of the program and to creating a recovery culture.

- ***A Recovery Environment:*** Leaders can engender and cultivate a recovery culture where staff and people being served feel safe enough to take the risks to learn and grow – to step out and try better ways of working with each other. Providing a safe place in which new ideas and behaviors can be experimented is a key ingredient to developing a recovery-oriented culture.

This means that failure is not a bad word. People should never be made to feel like they are a failure. It is essential for people to learn from mistakes, and to make it safe for them to try again. Failures become an opportunity to reexamine our strategies, find better ways to proceed, and to watch our personal and collective responses as we rise to the challenges that beckon us to be more creative and original as we develop ways to promote a recovery culture.

- ***Meaning and Purpose:*** When leaders openly value and interpret the meaning that comes from witnessing people recover, they are role-modeling a powerful reflective skill by identifying ways of extracting meaning from the subtleties of the recovery process. When leaders continually role-model ways of identifying the meaningful moments embedded in the recovery process, they demonstrate and reinforce the joy of supporting people who are recovering. They set an expectation of how to “be” with people and how to be effective in the work.

Leaders can regularly point out the meaning and purpose of our work and its potential to promote personal and professional growth for both staff and for those receiving services. This process of articulation (explaining what’s going on from a recovery point of view) is a very important practice, particularly when it comes to non-concrete things like “meaning.” There are two subsets

of the *meaning and purpose* guiding light that are worth further mention – Spirit and Valued Role.

- **Spirit:** Many authors have written about the “spirit” that organizations develop. This is not used in a religious sense, but the kind of spirit you might see when you watch a good sports team play a winning game. We say, “They really have a great spirit!” Leaders can help perpetuate a positive and winning spirit throughout the organization. This will provide vitality and energy to carry everyone through tough times and help the organization maintain a positive recovery culture. Developing this type of “spirit” in an organization can provide the oomph and the glue to keep us moving through experiences that threaten to diminish a recovery culture.
- **Valued Role:** Another effective way leaders can create meaning and purpose in an organization is to make sure there are valued and meaningful roles for both staff and people receiving services to assume. This perpetuates and sustains the recovery response and reinforces a culture of recovery.

Leaders who pay attention to the guiding lights and reflect them in their ways of *Being* and *Doing* will harness the inherent energy in that light and will align the whole organization with recovery principles, which will be passed along to those utilizing the services in a natural and genuine manner.

Stay tuned for Part Three where we will talk about the actions we can take to sustain a recovery culture. Yes, *culture* is not something you can do once, walk away, and assume it’s there to stay. To maintain a recovery culture we must constantly nurture it, find ways for it to grow beyond its immediate state, correct any *drift* that may be occurring (and, by the way, you can count on *drift* so it’s best to make plans to keep it in check).

See you in Part Three.

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