DEVELOPING PRODUCTIVITY IN MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT: Although the new wave of attention to human services productivity is often motivated by fiscal concerns, a well-balanced approach calls for attention to the organizational processes and clinical practices that yield productivity as well as to numerical measures and “bottom lines.” This article presents a comprehensive view via a ten-point model of organizational development addressing fiscal, programmatic, technical and interpersonal aspects of productivity development. A case illustration drawn from the Alameda County (California) Mental Health Service is also presented.

Recent fiscal constraints on mental health services have increasingly led administrators to devote attention to productivity and its development. In a recent survey by Goplerud, Walfish and Broskowski (1985) mental health administrators identified 77 strategies for weathering cutbacks. Of these, “develop productivity standards” was ranked #4. Although none of the strategies referred to implementing a comprehensive productivity development program, many of the other highly ranked strategies—such as “develop a sound accounting and management information capacity” or “prioritize services for cutbacks and expansions” would be essential components of such a program.

Although the new wave of attention to productivity in the human services is often motivated by fiscal concerns, the organizational process and clinical practices that yield productivity, as well as community and client needs must be addressed along with fiscal “bottom lines” in any comprehensive and viable approach to this matter. The purpose of this article is to provide a framework for such an approach. A ten-point model of organizational development is offered in which attention is given to the fiscal and programmatic as well as technical and interpersonal, aspects of productivity and its improvement. This is followed by a case illustration drawn from the Alameda County (California) Mental Health Service’s community mental health outpatient clinics.
DEFINITIONS OF PRODUCTIVITY

While scores of productivity definitions are to be found in the literature (e.g. Duggan 1983; Tuttle 1983), all definitions of productivity involve some concept of either effectiveness, efficiency, or both. Effectiveness generally refers to the actual production of a desired result. In a mental health program a variety of desired results are pursued including resolution of clients' problems, face-to-face service contacts with clients, revenue production and the organization's survival in the community. Efficiency usually refers to the ratio of effective results to the resources expended in producing the results. Thus, to illustrate simply, five hours of face-to-face service contact per FTE per day might be viewed as more efficient than three hours of face-to-face contact per FTE per day; or, a program that can recoup 80% of operating expenses in revenue might be seen as more efficient than one recouping 70% of operating expenses.

Most definitions of productivity emphasize efficiency in that they employ some concept of the relationship between output and input, sometimes expressed as a ratio; output/input = productivity, or O/I = P. The simplicity of the ratio bears little resemblance to the complexity of the mental health administrator's task. Not only is the ratio meaningless without a standard against which it is measured, but the nature of outputs and inputs in a mental health organization is quite complex. Included are such intangible variables as staff motivation and morale, knowledge and skill as well as the more tangible revenues and units of service delivered.

A TEN POINT MODEL FOR PRODUCTIVITY DEVELOPMENT

If a productivity development program is to be successful it must address all of the above variables and involve the coordinated participation and support of fiscal officers, program managers, supervisors and clinicians. The following ten-point model is offered as a framework for addressing this complex issue in a way that recognizes the needs, legitimacy and importance of each of these participants. In reviewing these ten points, the reader should note that although they are all critical to an effective productivity development program, they do not constitute a rigid ten-step sequence. Some of these points are prerequisite to others. For example, an operational definition of productivity must be specified here before a standard can be set regarding that measure. However, in actual practice, most of these ten points will need to be addressed as opportunities emerge; and many of them will be addressed simultaneously, as will be evident in the case illustration.

Point 1: Develop Motivation

As in any change effort, the willing and motivated participation of key persons is essential in building productivity. In human service organizations moti-