WORK PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING: An Essential Feature of Accountable Mental Health Administration

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ABSTRACT

Procedural guidelines are presented for the use of work performance contracting in mental health administration. After describing the rationale and criteria for performance contracting in human service settings, procedures are recommended for (1) developing work performance standards, (2) negotiating performance agreements, and (3) contracting for an acceptable level of employee performance. The utility of performance contracting in working with governing boards and consultants is also described.

The effective administrator is successful in his or her efforts to get staff on task and to ensure that tasks are completed so that the organization’s goals and objectives are realized. This article is concerned with a particular aspect of staff orientation: how performance standards are developed for the tasks that employees are to perform and how those standards are communicated to the employee. Its major premise is that orienting an employee to the task that he or she is to perform is best accomplished by developing explicit standards for performance of the task and contracting with the employee for a standard or above-standard level of performance. Each employee in a mental health organization should therefore have specific performance standards including an objective behavioral description of the work assigned to the position. This should minimally consist of the specific product required for satisfactory completion of the assignment (e.g., a written report to one’s supervisor) as well as the time lines for completion of the assignment.

DEVELOPING PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Work assignments must be carefully worded so that they are output rather than input oriented. In addition, they must be measurable in dimensions such as time, quantity, quality, and cost. Finally, work assignments must be relevant to the goals and objectives of the organization and to the employee’s role in the organization as well as feasible with respect to available resources and the employee’s skills and abilities.

Each work performance agreement should be written so that it indicates the employee’s position in the organization; line of supervision; work assignment; and timetable for performance evaluation. The follow-

REFERENCES


Dolgoff, T. "Clinicians and administrators in mental health organizations." UNIT III, INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAM IN MENTAL HEALTH ADMINISTRATION. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, School of Public Health, 1981.


ing is a format that the author has found useful in a wide variety of human service settings.

WORK PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Position Title:
Qualifications:
Employee:
Supervisor
Step, Grade:
Salary Range:
Benefits:
Date of Employment (Present position):
Date of Performance Standards:
Description of Assignment:
(Work Assignments, Products, and Time Lines)

Evaluation:
Written evaluation of the employee's work performance relative to the assignments specified above will be made in six months (date) and at the employee's anniversary date. These work performance standards, jointly agreed upon by (employee) and (supervisor) will be used as criteria for evaluating performance when applicable.

Revision:
It is further understood that these may be modified with concurrence of the employee and the immediate supervisor. Proposed changes must be submitted to the program's Executive Director for final approval.

Employee Signature: date
Supervisor Signature: date
Executive Director Signature: date

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

The most detailed list of work performance standards is the agreement between the administrator and his or her supervising authority (e.g., Board of Trustees, supervising state official). The administrator's performance standards should specify goals, objectives, target behaviors, and time lines for every area of agency operation and must call for performance consistent with legal and ethical guidelines as well as the available research literature pertinent to mental health programming. The administrator's performance standards should also describe the specific mechanisms that will be employed by the program in ensuring that legal and ethical criteria for service delivery are met.

A model work performance standards agreement for the administrator of a human service program has been provided by Christian (1981a). When such a comprehensive performance agreement is developed for the administrator, it can serve as an overall framework for specifying (delegating) work performance standards for program staff. This strategy helps to ensure that each employee's performance standards are drawn up by his or her supervisor, thereby further reinforcing the lines of authority characteristic of one's organizational structure. In addition, Christian (1981b) has described how the administrator's performance agreement can be used to structure program evaluation activities.

NON-ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

As has been noted, work performance standards for administrative staff can be an important step toward ensuring that organizational structure, goal orientation, and quality control become truly pervasive. What remains, then, is to continue this trend in the delegation of work assignments to the subordinate personnel in each department of the organization. (Examples of work performance standards for administrative and non-administrative personnel are provided by Christian and Hannah (in press).

The Case Manager System. One strategy for developing performance standards for direct service staff that the author has found to be particularly effective in mental health programs is the case manager system (Christian, 1981c). In this system, each direct service staff member is assigned (via work performance standards) the task of case manager for a particular client. In this role, the employee is responsible (in consultation with other agency staff) for (1) assessing the client's needs; (2) setting goals and objectives for treatment; (3) planning, conducting, and evaluating the success of data-based treatment projects based on the special needs of the individual; (4) documenting change in the client's case record (e.g., graphical representations, progress notes, etc.); (5) assisting in transitional planning for the client (e.g., discharge and follow-up); and (6) generally monitoring the client's program of services to ensure that his or her needs are being met and rights are being protected.

This kind of operational specificity and consistency contributes to program accountability and quality control. In addition, it increases the probability that employees directly involved with service delivery will be concerned with the special needs of the individual client, will become more product-oriented in their jobs, and will utilize a more systematic, problem-solving approach to their work assignments.

Other advantages of the case manager approach to work assignment include its emphasis on client advocacy and the likelihood that it will result in job enrichment for agency staff. Specifically, the case manager is in a