Use of External Requirements for Internal Needs

Jeffrey R. Solomon, Ph.D.
Daniel S. Wartenberg, MPH

The typical mental health agency of the 80s is confronted with daily demands for information from funding, licensing, and certifying bodies. These external demands are viewed as administrative baggage, or at best, a nuisance. At worst, they are viewed as an intractable good service, diffusing valuable resources and redirecting them to "bureaucratic" needs (Talbot 1984).

This paper attempts to use theoretical and practical data to demonstrate how requirements from external sources can be used to meet internal needs. To put this demonstration to practice there must be an administrative openness which understands and appreciates the intent behind the increasing numbers and kinds of requirements generated from external funding, licensing, and sponsoring sources.

We propose that agencies use requirements as an impetus for taking positive steps toward better management. However, an agency must first possess the management tools needed to be self-aware, primarily a sound system of program evaluation, quality assurance, and an integrated management information system. Historically, most agencies have developed these functions in response to external reporting requirements, investing the minimum resources possible to obtain the required information. This approach is limited. Certain basic ground rules are required to accomplish the objective:
- there must be an agency-wide willingness to change;
- the administrator must integrate a willingness to be honest to himself/herself as an administrator, including working through such catastrophic fantasies as closing programs where indicated;
- there must be a strong belief in the efficacy of agency services and in the value of the human service delivery system;
- there must be a distinction between an agency's responsibilities to its staff and to its clients.

INFORMATION NEEDS

Gilbert and Specht (1974) advocate social policy evaluation on the basis of equality, equity, and adequacy. Within the social agency, an analog to this concept becomes accessibility, acceptability, and outcome. The board of directors and senior administration of any agency must know how accessible the agency is to an appropriate client group; how acceptable that group finds the services; and to what degree the service outcomes reflect agency objectives.

For information to synergistically meet the five sets of needs outlined below it must be put into a system that is comprehensive, accessible, and understandable.

The needs include:
1. The funding, licensing, and sponsoring sources demand statistics, chart standards, fiscal accountability, eligibility standards, and other data. These demands generally conform to a relatively low common denominator, and use quantifiable rather than quality related information.
2. Voluntary accreditation include such bodies as the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals, the Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities and The Child Welfare League of America. Standards are developed by leadership agencies from around the country with an overall objective to assure quality on a continuous upgrading basis. In many states and settings this voluntary accreditation process becomes mandatory as a result of public policy or community pressure. It should also be noted that accreditation reflects a portrait of an agency when it's had adequate opportunity to prepare for an accreditation visit.
3. Staff desires are an important need of an agency. Included herein are increased education and knowledge about programs, additional valuable clinical data, an intellectual stimulation beyond such factors as the best way to maintain case records. As Drucker (1954) points out, the whiter the collar of the worker, the higher his/her educational level, the more that management has to respond to needs well beyond providing a secure job with a paycheck.
4. Governing body pressure can be critical. Some questions that should be under constant review by the governing body are: Does the agency have a mission? To what degree is the mission being met? At what cost to the community are the services being delivered? As the Harvard Business Review recently pointed out (Unterman & Davis, 1984), too many nonprofit agency boards focus on operational rather than organizational and planning questions.
5. Finally, management desires and needs must be highlighted. How valid and adequate is
information for decision making? Are the agency's services providing an optimal pattern within a human service framework which recognizes that needs, by their very nature in this society, outstrip resources.

METHOD

Systems designed to provide data for specific external reporting requirements tend to be fragmented. When an agency confronts questions regarding outcome, accessibility, or acceptability, the information is not readily available because external sources usually require only the bare minimum. External sources rarely require information such as the characteristics of individuals who have been either successful or unsuccessful in the agency. Yet, this data can be of immeasurable value to management trying to maximize effective services. Information systems should attempt to anticipate the kinds of information that will be needed, including external requirements. This implies that an agency knows its mission, goals, and objectives and has defined its information needs in those terms. The irony in many settings is that the information that could support decision making is maintained but is never used for management purposes. Although limited by not being readily available, a typical case record will contain a wealth of information on client characteristics, referral sources, and services rendered. If a manager wanted to know the average length of stay of clients active in a program at a given time, for example, someone would have to comb through hundreds of records to obtain this basic aggregate information. Thus, the mere existence of data does not translate into a functional information system.

Until recently the technology needed to support such a system was prohibitively expensive and required significant expertise to operate. As a result, most agencies collected only the information absolutely required. Microcomputers have dramatically altered this situation (Menz 1983). Relatively inexpensive, "user friendly" microcomputers equipped with data basing and statistical analysis software packages enhanced the capability of agencies to provide more complex information at an affordable price. Access to significant management information became a possibility to a wide range of providers.

The development of necessary requisite information systems is only an insufficient step towards "agency self-awareness." How often has one heard of the agency who bought a wonderful new computer system but can't get anything out of it. The existence of management information does not guarantee its use. A feedback loop must exist to bring necessary information to the attention of decision makers, perhaps by hiring personnel capable of translating masses of raw data into useable management reports. Often an agency operating on scarce resources is unwilling to divert funds from direct service to nonservice areas. Program evaluation and quality assurance are often delegated to inexperienced personnel whose other responsibilities don't allow them the time to sift through raw information for what is relevant and significant. Ideally, personnel should carry out the program evaluation and quality assurance functions who do not have direct service responsibilities and who are directly accountable to top management.

You may be saying, "This information would be very nice, but I have limited resources to expend and would prefer to utilize money for direct service." The following examples attempt to justify the cost.

Considering accessibility, one asks; to what degree is a population served representative of an overall target population? In Dade County, Florida, the Community Mental Health Board made data reporting a system-wide objective of accessibility. A local mental health provider noted two areas of vulnerability: (1) underrepresentation of Hispanics in the case load (despite bilingual staff and geographically accessible locations); (2) underrepresentation of men in the case load (several standard deviations beyond target population proportion).

This agency's first response was defensive and angry. A second, more thoughtful response sought to utilize two important roles of administration: (a) make lemonade from lemons; and (b) resolve conflict with win/win solutions (Goldaber, 1982). As a result, the agency developed a special project aimed at reaching out to Hispanics. The United States Department of Health and Human Services funded a three-year demonstration involving the resources of a local university aimed at increasing the body of knowledge surrounding the issue. In addition to successfully identifying outreach techniques, it resulted in several publications, conference presentation, and a positive reaction from the Community Mental Health Board which recognized a substantive seriousness about the outcome of evaluative efforts.

The agency began to open its offices during the evening to accommodate men keeping 9 to 5 office hours. The result was a significant increase in the proportion of males in treatment.

An example of acceptability can be found in one large vocational rehabilitation agency whose changing public policy resulted in an increased proportion of financial support coming from third party payments which purchase services based upon a delivery of specific units of service. Attendance, attrition, and punctuality had meanings beyond their roles in the rehabilitation process. They were important to sustain the financial underpinnings of the overall delivery system. In reviewing data related to items such