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Organizational Change: Flexible Communication Strategies in Vocational Rehabilitation[1]

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Introduction

COVID-19 has challenged every aspect of our lives and how we deliver services to our consumers. As we discussed this topic, we recognized that as leaders we have to shift priorities, that our assumptions on how to deliver services were being challenged, that we would need to be creative with business processes, and that flexibility would be needed at every level of our state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies.

We decided that how we communicate will be our most foundational change. Throughout the country, as VR agencies were locking down and employees were sent home to ensure safety, telework policies needed to be revised. Communication would define how we responded to the crisis.

Each of us shared how our respective VR agencies were responding. Some VR agencies were keeping their offices open, while others were closing offices and conducting only virtual service delivery. Some VR agencies were accelerating the use of electronic signatures. All were increasing their use of telework. All VR agencies were experimenting with the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, and other platforms for videoconferencing and virtual communication.

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[1] This organizational study was designed and completed by participants in the 2019-20 Cohort of the Executive Leadership Seminar Series, National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute, Interwork Institute, San Diego State University.

How could we ensure that this change in communication practices are taking place according to our guiding principles, mission, and vision? How could we ensure consistency throughout our organizations? How would we know that the communications took place with respect, compassion, and integrity? Furthermore, with technology creeping into our homes, did we need to establish new guidelines for professionalism?

From a structural framework[2], we observed that each VR agency needed to develop its own goals and objectives and communication strategies. The changes would likely alter the nature of the workforce. The vastly different economies of scale of each state would influence the approach chosen. Organizational culture and environment are also important factors, both preceding and following the shift.

The human resources frame is likely to undergo the greatest impact from a flexible communication strategy. This shift will have a profound effect on the lives of staff, partners, and the consumers we serve. Our choice of goals is critical. Will we design our strategies to promote flexibility for all parties and remove barriers to make VR more accessible to all?

A flexible communication strategy will be no less consequential from a political framework. The potential exists to use virtual platforms to break through organizational silos and increase transparency and to improve outreach to culturally and geographically underserved portions of our communities.

The symbolism of a flexible communication strategy is one of its hallmarks. Our kitchens and living rooms are now our meeting places, making our private interior spaces visible to all. Symbolically, the shift is toward immediacy, instant communication, and greater local control. It also symbolizes the willingness of our organizations to adapt and embrace innovation. It can also symbolize our ability to align these changes with our principles and values.

Keeping in mind the significance of implementing rapid communication changes in the midst of a pandemic, we focused on establishing communication goals that would not only reflect the integrity of vocational rehabilitation as a program, but also provide useful, specific and relevant strategies for accomplishing those goals. The flexible communication goals we have provided, strive to acknowledge the importance of virtual service delivery, continuous program improvement, mindfulness of laws, regulations and policies, the role of various stake holders, and the long-term implications for staff training and development in a virtual service environment.

Goals:

As we completed our discussion of the reasons for a flexible communication strategy, we looked at specific goals to help us get there.

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[2] The authors used the four frames based on the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their text Reframing Organizations, 6th Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2017.

1. Vocational Rehabilitation programs will have the ability to operate virtually.
   o Communicate in a variety of methods to all VR customers, including consumers, staff, vendors, employers, advocates, and other stakeholders.
   o Develop policies and procedures that address worker and security safeguards while working in a remote environment – for example, computer and equipment support, safe workplace practices, reasonable accommodation policies, and information security.
2. Electronic communications will be extended to service delivery with the promotion of electronic signatures.
   o Implement electronic signature policies with broad accessibility. Make training on electronic signature procedures available for all staff, vendors, and consumers.
3. Fiscal operations including data sharing, billing, invoicing, contracts, memorandums of understanding, etc. will be processed through online portals. These portals allow for vendors to register, invoice, and monitor the progress of their invoices online. Fiscal staff have to learn to automate invoice processing.
   o Create a portal for vendors to access to get relevant information such as the status of invoices and reports. These portals should be set up to receive feedback from Vendors as well. This tool will provide staff a secure and easy means of sending authorizations and confidential documents to vendors as well as consumers and business partners.
   o Purchase Adobe Acrobat Pro to combine files into a single pdf document. Utilize shared drives to transmit internal requisitions, purchase orders, and invoices. This is an important part of the invoicing process because these documents are crossing different offices with the VR agency.
4. Establish faster feedback regarding service delivery.
   o Use Surveys/polls **--** two-way communication is vital to any effective communication strategy, and developing formal tactics to listen to employees is essential. Employers can elicit fast feedback through surveys and polls about specific issues or general concerns. Email surveys can be sent after a case is closed or after an initial intake.
   o Provide electronic customer feedback forms for consumers and vendors which can be placed on the VR agencies' website.
   o Examine messaging applications such as Jabber and Slack and chatbots that interact with applicants and employees through automation may be the future of workplace communication. Provide Live Chat Support -- this can address many issues such as what services does the agency offer.
5. Flexible communication plans need to be developed and implemented that ensure transparency.
   o Staff have adjusted to teleworking in varying degrees. Solicit feedback to assess their new business processes. What has and has not worked well? What informs their decisions on best methods to communicate with clients, partners, etc. (i.e. consumer choice, convenience, fears around health/safety)?
   o Identify indicators to measure successful communication. Utilize surveys such as Survey Monkey to survey consumers, staff, and partners. Include questions to evaluate staff engagement.

- Lead with trust and transparency. Use frequent and meaningful communication rather than micromanagement. Set clear expectations and trust your staff to execute. Understand that there will be some staff who struggle with the new model, similar to pre-COVID.
- Create an internal control communication document that is easily accessible by all staff and managers and is specific to new teleworking protocols. This will be a fluid document as situations change daily. This will also serve as an audit document, as needed.
- Create an agency application to post updates on a dedicated section of the agency's website. For example, Maryland has "In DORS." This information is relevant to staff and is an internal website.

6.   Programs should identify and implement promising communication procedures on a statewide level.
- Identify promising communication practices by surveying agency employees, service providers and consumers.
  - Surveys should consider target audiences, modes of communication (i.e., US mail, email, text messages, phone calls, etc.), accessibility of modes of communication, frequency of communication, and purpose of communications.
- Implement procedures regarding frequency and purpose of communications.
  - Procedures should be located in a space available to all employees.
  - Procedures should include parties responsible for creating and disseminating the communications.
  - Procedures should include processes for determining if the communications had the desired impact.
- Effectiveness of communication strategies should be evaluated.
- Analyze service delivery data such as no-show rates, employment outcomes, consumer satisfaction, compliance with receiving data needed for federal reporting, etc.
- VR agencies have multiple methods of clear, consistent, and authentic communication. These include:
  - Virtual video, vendor portal, email, text messaging, etc. are available to staff, consumers and service providers.

7. Relationships with employers and stakeholders have been established and they have reliable communication access points with the VR agency at the State's regional level.
- VR agencies have identified staff responsible for and are knowledgeable of the individual workforce areas of the state who can establish relationships with employer-involved organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Development Boards, and professional associations.
- Staff have clear procedures for identifying and disseminating training and employment opportunities to appropriate staff members.

8. Programs have the ability to purchase technology for consumers for the purpose of establishing fast and effective communication with the VR agency and other entities involved in their rehabilitation plan.
- Update program policies to reflect a method to procure or arrange for the procurement of technology which allows staff to communicate with consumers.

- o Establish program budgets to procure technology for consumers that meet the consumers' communication needs.
9. Programs have staff that are highly trained in effective in-person, written, and virtual service delivery.
    - o Train managers/employees in how to effectively supervise staff who are working remotely.
    - o Train counselors in how to develop rapport with consumers and help them to progress in their program while engaged in remote communication with them. Training in computer and remote access skills are essential in this environment.
10. Engagement and employee retention are critical to the success of VR programs.
    - o Integrate onboarding and ongoing training programs to ensure staff skills are maintained and brought up to date with new communication options and communication policies.
    - o Develop hiring, onboarding, and training systems for staff that can take place remotely. This will require a highly planned and intentional system of communication between managers and their employees. Electronic attendance recording systems can also be utilized.
    - o Ensure our beliefs and business practices are aligned with the mission and vision of our programs. The global pandemic has challenged us to recreate how we hire, onboard and train talent in a virtual environment. Many VR agencies have routinely used web-based platforms to post for vacancies but we have had to be more thoughtful about every step after we interview and select candidates for openings. Leaders should develop purposeful plans of their processes for onboarding and training. This will include setting expectations for frequency of communication, as well as, methods for communication and how to help the new employee connect with the office and agency team. Leaders are encouraged to be innovative and creative in developing new processes. Examples:
        - ▪ Interviews
            - □ In Missouri, vacancies within the VR agency are posted on job sites, such as, Indeed.com and posted on the State of Missouri's website. We use Hire True to screen applications, resumes, and cover letters to assist with the selection of candidates for open positions. Due to COVID -19, we have started to conduct virtual interviews and invite top candidates to the office for a face to face interview where CDC Covid-19 protocols are followed. In most instances, video conferencing is also used as some of the interview team members are across the state and can't join in person due to statewide travel restrictions.
        - ▪ Early Onboarding
            - □ Once an offer of employment is made and accepted the onboarding process should begin. There is great value in starting the process before the employee's first day as it gives supervisors and the new employee a great opportunity to establish a connection. It is important that this process is intentional and deliberate because you want the new employee to feel welcomed and part of the team. Communicating with the new employee gives the supervisor an opportunity to clarify the person's role and answer any questions they have thought about after the interview.

- ☐ The supervisor should ensure that the new hire has the equipment they will need to work remotely.
  - ▪ The Welcome
    - ☐ Due to Covid-19 many first day processes may not involve face to face introductions with the entire office team. Use this opportunity to creatively introduce the new employee to co-workers. A virtual welcome, such as, a video conference with the team or perhaps welcome notes signed by each team that are given to the new employee on the first day. Typical processes, such as, collecting I-9 documentation, office tour, training on email and case management platforms will continue to happen. This is also an opportunity to discuss the locations of PPE and office safety protocols. Discuss office schedules that include telework/remote work policies.
  - ▪ Onboarding
    - ☐ Many VR agencies have training guides to help new employees learn their job. Consideration should be given to revisiting training tools to include Covid-19 flexibilities around business processes. It is important that the new employee is made aware of any office processes that involve the team, such as staff meetings, trainings, etc.

11. Staff at all levels are engaged and accessible to each other with a focus on wellness and creating a supportive environment.
    - o The global pandemic and community responses to it have resulted in stress and chaos for many. The impact and disruption to personal and professional well-being is immense. As leaders, we need to adopt practices of being kinder to ourselves and others as a way to support employee well-being. Understand that anxiety is natural right now. In the workplace we can support ourselves and each other by being thoughtful in how we communicate and implement necessary changes. Examples:
      - ▪ Considerations should be given to flexible work schedules so employees can meet the demands of competing priorities, personally and professionally.
      - ▪ Create a daily routine that lends itself to managing stress and helping with organization. This can include scheduled breaks from the computer screen, meditation, stretching and other physical activity, and healthy eating.
      - ▪ Be visible to your peers. Utilize the features of video conferencing to stay connected and engaged. This will help maintain relationships.
      - ▪ Adhere to professional etiquette in terms of appearance and virtual work settings. Our peers deserve the same respect in a virtual work setting that we would give in a traditional work setting. It demonstrates preparedness and engagement.

Findings

Consistent emphasis on the mission and values of the VR agency in all communications will reinforce the commitment that employees and service providers have to their profession and provide the foundation for our changing environment. The COVID19 pandemic has increased VR agencies' communication strategies and awareness of the multiple modes of communications available to the public. The use of

technology for communication is more effective and more widely used and accepted if VR agencies provide training to staff and consumers.

VR agencies must be aware of the "overwhelmed" feeling that staff and consumers are experiencing as a result of the pandemic and take it into consideration when communication issues arise. Support should be provided to staff to address the stress of working from home. Working in a virtual environment requires a deliberate effort to maintain relationships with and among staff and consumers.

Conclusion

The process of determining flexible communication strategies for VR agencies was a very beneficial experience. Having representatives on the team from four different VR agencies provided members with valuable information about how states were adjusting to a rapidly changing environment. We were learning first-hand where communications were and were not effective. This 'learn by doing' approach lead us to some concrete recommendations for all VR agencies to consider when developing or reviewing their communication strategies.

We observed during this process that maintaining a consistent emphasis on the mission of the VR agency in all communications can reinforce the commitment that employees and service providers have to their profession and provide a foundation upon which the changing environment can stand. We also noted that the COVID19 pandemic has increased VR communication methods and awareness of the multiple modes of communications available to the public. The use of technology is more effective and more widely used and accepted if VR agencies provide training to staff and consumers. We feel that VR agencies must be aware of the "overwhelmed" feeling that staff and consumers are experiencing as a result of the pandemic and take it into consideration when communication issues arise. Support should be provided to staff to address the stresses of working from home. Also, working in a virtual environment requires a deliberate effort to maintain relationships with and among staff and consumers.

It is this team's recommendation that VR agencies make a deliberate effort to establish flexible communication procedures which are accessible, available to the general public, mindful of the virtual work environment, ensure transparency and contain an ongoing method of evaluation and adjustment. The goals established in this paper provide VR agencies with a variety of considerations and suggestions that will ultimately result in flexible and effective communication among staff, consumers, partners, and employers. We learned through this process that state VR agencies have been creative in their approaches to providing services through telecommunications and that we have a lot to learn from each other. We have learned that it is essential to monitor and adjust communication strategies on an ongoing basis as it requires VR agencies to re-evaluate and adjust to the changing environments, technologies, and consumers.