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THINKING ABOUT MODEL COHERENCY*

This paper discusses Model Coherency, one of fifty dimensions of human service quality measured by PASS 3 (Wolfensberger and Glenn, 1975). It is written mostly for people who are learning about PASS 3 in an introductory training workshop. The only effective way to learn about Model Coherency --like the rest of PASS 3-- is continuing practice in analysis of human services; reading this will help, but it won't substitute for guided practice with your team.

Model Coherence is different from other PASS 3 ratings.

● The other ratings ask you to think about one dimension of human service quality at a time. Model Coherency asks your team to develop a picture of the program as a whole.

● The other ratings provide more definite, external guidelines for judgement. Model Coherency challenges your team to state its own values and assumptions clearly.

● The other ratings are more likely to have a "right" answer in the sense that different teams evaluating the same program would be quite likely to gather similar evidence, perform similar analyses, and describe program quality with similar rating levels. While different teams considering the Model Coherence of the same program would very likely describe the program in similar terms and assign similar levels, it is quite possible that they would analyze the program in different ways.

There is, then, no standard "correct" way to analyze Model Coherency. Not even the description of the rating in the Field Manual is definitive (the next edition will catch up). You can expect that your team leader will choose a way to conciliate Model Coherency that, in his or her judgement, best fits the program you are assessing, your team's learning needs, and his or her leadership style.

You can also expect to spend a substantial proportion of your team's conciliation time on Model Coherency. Even highly experienced teams spend several hours discussing this rating because it provides a foundation for understanding and judging the program's quality.

TASKS

As a PASS 3 rating, Model Coherency is a synthesis of team judgements about how effectively a program's defining features fit the needs of the people the program serves. To do a complete job of judging a program's model coherency a team does six tasks:

● The team describes their understanding of the program's defining features.

● The team develops a shared account of the needs of the people the program serves.

● The team decides the overall fit between the program as it is and the team account of the needs of the people it serves.

● The team identifies potential problems arising from the program's design as it interacts with people's needs and the program's environment and describes the way the program is presently managing them.

● The team states principles for more effective program design and problem management.

● The team identifies short range and long term implications of the program's design and means of managing its basic problems which are summarized in the assignment of a rating level.

An effective team may choose to do these tasks in several different sequences and can vary the amount of emphasis placed

on one or another of the tasks. Most teams will backtrack as the results of one task influences team understanding of another. Your team leader will make these decisions during the practice assessment.

The key to this rating is your team's ability to use plain English words to describe the program and the people it serves. Some programs come wrapped in jargon. It's up to you to test professional language to understand its function. Does a professional term make service more effective or does it simply serve to keep people who don't share an insider's perspective in their place? It will be hard to decide this if some team members don't share professional expertise with program staff. It will be just as hard to decide if some team members don't actively push the team to "say it in plain words."

DESCRIBING THE PROGRAM
(What Is)

To judge a program's model coherency your team needs a clear summary description of its defining features.

There are three sources of information for you to use in constructing this summary: the program's formal account of itself in written descriptions and its manager's responses to the team's inquiry; informal interviews with program staff, consumers, and others; and direct observations of the program as delivered.

As you describe the program you will probably discover conflicting information in the various accounts of the program. When this happens, don't try to decide which is "right", just record the apparently conflicting information and note its sources (e.g. the official program description, and the program director say the institution serves children, but interviews with direct service workers and a check of the records show that three of the twenty people who live there are over 21).

To reduce the chance of error, most teams will record program description information on large pieces of newsprint ("wallpaper") during their inquiry with the program's management.

You will describe five features of the program.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Describe the people the program serves:

● How many people of each sex are served?

● What are their ages? (Describe the range and distribution.)

● Other demographic information if it is significant, for example: race, socio-economic status, place of orign, religion, relationship to natural families.

PROGRAM'S ACCOUNT OF PARTICIPANT IDENTITY & NEEDS

How do program staff see the needs of the people they serve and what do they believe are the key elements in meeting those needs?

● Consider written program descriptions, service records and individual program plans, formal conversations (such as response to inquiry or staff meetings), and informal conversations.

● Summarize the sorts of labels that staff use to describe people including both "professional" language (such as diagnostic terms) and "everyday" labels ("everyone here is a behavior problem," "these are our self-feeders," "the chronics are only capable of minimal self-care").

● Summarize what staff see as the most important characteristics of the people they serve.

● Summarize staff beliefs about people's future. What do they think people's lives will be like in a year, 5 years, 10 years?

● Summarize what staff say is the program's philosophy. What beliefs about people and their needs does the program staff hold?

● Describe the way(s) in which the program groups the people it serves. What reasons are given for the grouping(s)?

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS (Content)

What are the major contributions the program makes to the quality of life of the people it serves? What do people depend on the program for?

● Summarize the program's goals. If the program is fully successful, what do staff believe will happen for the people served? How do staff think people's lives will change as a result of the problem?

● Sometimes program features that staff might think of as incidental have a major effect on people's quality of life (for example many "day treatment" services provide the people they serve with their only occupational role; institutions frequently don't think about themselves as people's homes). Be sure you carefully describe each of the functions you saw the program actually serving for people.

● Remember, a program can make negative contributions to people's quality of life as well as positive contributions.

PROGRAM PROCESS

Describe how the program works toward its accomplishments.

● By what means does the program make each of its contributions to people's lives?

● Consider staff explanation and your observation of the way in which the program uses people's time, the methods staff use, and the physical settings the program uses.

● Sometimes in describing "how" the program happens you will discover additional contributions (positive or negative) the program makes to people's quality of life.

STAFF IDENTITY & COMPETENCIES

Describe the people who provide service.

● What competencies do staff identify as important to

effective service delivery? Include both information from managers and other service workers.

● How do staff identify themselves? Consider the professions staff identify with; any obvious symbols of staff identity (e.g. style of dress, diplomas displayed, distinctive equipment, titles used in conversation with or about people, etc.); the structure of job titles the program uses; and the background and other work experience of the staff.

● How would members of the public identify the program staff?

CREATING A TEAM ACCOUNT OF THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE SERVED

This is the most important step in the conciliation process. It results in a clear statement of your team's beliefs about the people the program serves. It is the team answer to these basic questions:

● "Who are the people served by this program and what are their most important needs at this time?"

● "What do we believe is the best possible response to these people's needs?"

In thinking about your response to these fundamental questions:

● Focus on what you know about the specific group of people who depend on the service you are assessing.

● Question one another's ideas about what's true for "all people with (for instance) severe mental retardation"

● When team members make a general descriptive statement -- like "The people served here are powerless." -- ask for specifics: "How does that happen for the people we met?" "What are the implications of that for the people we met?"

● When team members make a general recommendation -- like "The people here need more social integration" -- ask for specifics: "In plain English, what would that mean for the people we met?" "How would things have to change for the people we met to benefit from that?"

This self testing isn't to deny the validity of general statements about people. It's to be sure that the team is representing the interests of the people who depend on the program as much as possible.

It may be hard to get past cliche statements about people ("these are chronic schizophrenics who need..." or "the people here are alcoholics who are best treated by..." or "all people have needs for self actualization"). To make your statements live, the team needs to relax and let patterns form in open discussion of the facts of life for the people you met and heard about. Imagine that you are outlining a collective biography of the people who depend on the service you are assessing. As you do so, ask one another questions that will sharpen your understanding of people in the context of their social situation:

● "What relationship do the people here have with their natural families?"

● "What roles do the people here have in their community?"

● "What connections do the people here have to the cash economy? What is their income? What impact does their economic situation have on their lives?"

● "How do other community members see the people here? How do they respond to them in person? Do they have any stereotypes about them?"

● "What have people's life experiences been like? Where have they lived? Worked? Been to school? What have their experiences prepared them for? Have people missed any important, common life experiences?"

● "What do we know about the practical, everyday experience of the problems that are described by people's labels? What life situations will pose the greatest challenges? What will be of the most practical help?

● "What futures do the people here look forward to? What are their dreams and aspirations?"

● Follow the implications of descriptors like "dependent" or "aggressive". Note that these words describe the present state of an historical process which you can understand

better by asking "In what ways has the person's life situation made this come to be?" and "Where will this process take the person over time?"

Your team leader will have chosen a way to assist the team in preparing this collective biography.

After you have summarized people's most important current needs, work together to outline the characteristics of an effective response to these needs within the scope of the program's function. Ask:

● "How do communities meet these needs for their valued citizens?" (This is more often a range of possibilities than a single way.)

● "What do we believe are the most effective technical responses to these needs?" (There may well be more than one technology that has good empirical support.)

● "Do there seem to be "built-in" conflicts between what is culturally valued and what is technically effective?"

It may seem to you that you don't have information or expertise enough to make reasonable statements about the needs of the people the program serves. That could be true. You may even feel that it isn't your team's place to make such a description. It is. What you are doing is making explicit the grounds on which you will make most of the other ratings. Any evaluation reflects evaluators' beliefs about what makes a service effective. This step in a PASS evaluation lets you examine the values you bring to the evaluation and make them public. When the team states the beliefs and values that formed the basis of the evaluation, the people who are receiving the evaluation can decide for themselves whether the team's position makes sense or not.

JUDGING THE FIT BETWEEN "WHAT IS" AND PEOPLE'S NEEDS

Review your team description of the program as it is in terms of your beliefs about people's most significant needs and the most effective ways to meet them.

Typical Problem	Likely Consequences
• Too wide an age range.	• Age inappropriateness for some or all. • Negative interpretations of some or all. • Loss of program intensity. • Fragmentation of staff time.
• Too many people.	• Low level of individualization. • "Lowest denominator" human management practices. • Overprotection. • Turning inward away from socially integrative activities. • Problems with physical facilities.
• To wide a range of needs and abilities.	• Low level of individualization. • Lack of program relevance for some or all. • Some people's needs are ignored or distorted. • Negative interpretations of some or all.

WORKFORCE

Typical Problems	Likely Consequences
• Poor fit between staff competencies and people's needs.	• Low program relevance to people's needs. • Low program intensity. • Consumers blaimed for lack of growth. • Staff self-renewal problems. • High staff development costs. • Waste. • Lack of innovation.
• Poor fit between service function and public perception of staff identity.	• Negative interpretations of people served. • Public confusion.

PROGRAM PROCESS

Typical Problems	Likely Consequences
• Inadequate to accomplish meaningful goals: •• Insufficient. •• Inefficient alloaction of resources.	• Confusion. • Low program intensity leading to diminished growth and lowered expectations. • Present and future consumer dependency. • Consumers blamed for underdevelopment. • Staff self-renewal problems. • Waste of time and money.
• Failure to use culturally valued means.	• Negative interpretations. • Segregation • Higher cost.

PROGRAM CONTENT

Typical Problems	Likely Consequences
• Lack of functionality in terms of people's life situation: •• Lack of commitment to community participation. •• Lack of attention to improving people's status. •• Overfocus on provider preference.	• Life wasting. • Impoverishment of experience • Stress on families and other natural personal supports. • Present and future segregation from community life. • Low levels of individualization • Age/Culture inappropriateness. • Negative interpretations. • Basic human needs unmet or poorly provided for.
• Too many functions in one setting.	• Congregation. • Segregation. • Regimentation. • Dehumanization.

COMMON PROBLEMS IN PROGRAM DESIGN

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE SERVED

Typical Problem	Likely Consequences
• Based on stereotyped perception of the identity of the people served. Especially when people are seen as... ...sick. ...dangerous. ...eternal children.	• Negative interpretations. • Overprotection • Low relevance of program to people's needs. • Poor fit between staff ability and people's needs.
• Based on segregating assumptions (e.g. "No one would want these people for neighbors under any circumstances.")	• Isolation from community life. • Negative interpretations. • Problems with indivdiualization • Abuse.
• Based on assumptions that are confused or hidden from the staff's conscious attention.	• Program is hard to manage. • Program is hard to understand. • Program is hard to learn from.

and its actual effects.

As you identify basic problems, describe the ways the program is presently managing each problem. In some instances a program will manage a basic problem by ignoring it or by denying its existence.

PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVED PROGRAM QUALITY

Review your findings about the fit between program design and people's needs and the basic problems you have identified. This can be summarized as a list of major issues the program needs to address to improve the quality of its service.

It isn't your team's job to make detailed plans for resolving these issues. It is important to help program staff formulate a set of well defined problems for them to work on.

Once you have identified major program quality issues, think about principles that will provide program staff with guidance in improving the program's performance. The most important principles will come from your reflection on the team's understanding of the needs of the people the program serves. Challenge yourselves to identify approaches to meeting people's needs that build on positive cultural values.

SUMMING UP

Summarize your work by identifying the short term and long term implications of the program for the quality of life of the people it serves. Select the rating level that best describes the relationship between the program's defining features and the needs of the people it serves. Then celebrate the completion of a major step in performing a competent assessment.

• Do the accomplishments the program defines for itself match your team's account of people's most important needs? Is the program contributing to meeting people's most important needs?

• Do the accomplishments the program defines for itself fall within the range of culturally valued, technically effective responses you have defined?

• Does the program staff's account of the identity and needs of the people served lead them to define needs and priorities similar to your those identified by your team?

• Are the program staff's expectations for people's future consistent with what your team believes to be realistic?

• Does the program use methods, schedules, and settings which are likely to be technically effective and as culturally valued as possible? Are these program processes an efficient path to meeting people's most significant needs?

• Are program staff capable of implementing technically effective services?

• Is the identity of program staff consistent with meeting people's needs in the most culturally valued ways?

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Experience with PASS 3 evaluations demonstrates that nearly every human service program faces basic problems which arise from the design of the program and its interactions with its environment. Few program managers seem to recognize the importance of careful planning to manage these basic problems. If fact, many program staff act as if they had no knowledge of these basic problems, though they live with their effects every day. At the end of this paper there is an outline of the kinds of problems programs commonly encounter. It is arranged along the dimensions your team used to describe the program, though it is in a different order.

111 This outline only suggests potential problems. It shouldn't be used like a checklist. The consequences that are listed are probable, not certain. Your team will base its work on this task on the experience of a specific program so you will be able to point to definite evidence of a basic problem