

Promising Practices: Learning Networks

Challenge

According to the 2000 *PSL: AB* survey, 20% of Marquette and Alger County youth reported experiencing 10 or less of the 40 Developmental Assets. The Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) considers this a serious problem—one that needs to be addressed by the community and youth development professionals.

Marquette and Alger County youth averaged 17.8 assets in 2000 *PSL: AB* survey. The youth with 0-10 assets averaged only 7.1 of the 40 Developmental Assets.

The 0-10 data also reveals:

- Only 3% of these youth reported that parents and other adults model positive, responsible behavior
- Only 3% of these youth reported positive family communication
- Only 2% reported a caring school climate

Operational and environmental challenges make it imperative that nonprofits overcome barriers and work better as collaborators, improve organizational challenges that impede their service to their customers and increase their knowledge about their own customers. Most importantly, nonprofits need performance improvement strategies and tools to help them create the changes needed to enhance their services to youth and families.

Program Description

Derived from an industry-based training model of continuous improvement, the Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) wanted to engage human service, education, and community leaders to identify promising practices, explore, and problem-solve organizational challenges and make changes in the their home agencies.

GLCYD modified a Learning Network model to create a community training and research initiative to help improve services to low asset youth. Learning Networks gather information about the 0-10 asset youth population and assist youth serving agencies and nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit agencies participating in the training were selected because of the following:

- They serve 0-10 asset youth and their families
- They use the 40 Developmental Asset Framework (to some degree) and are familiar with the *PSL: AB* Survey
- They cooperate with each other in various capacities through community collaborative bodies, some joint funding sources (state/federal/private grants) and community initiatives

Acquiring CEO and top management approval, commitment, and active involvement are important because Learning Network organizations identify a cross section of three to

four employees as an initial impact team. Each team is charged with transferring knowledge gained from Learning Network participation.

Over the course of a year, each member organization hosts a Learning Network meeting. They provide a history and overview of their organization, but also present a critical organizational issue that has a direct effect on their service to 0-10 asset youth. Learning Network members review the host's critical organizational issue and offer suggestions for improvement. Special topics and subject matter experts present at each meeting to increase awareness and understanding of how to work with 0-10 asset youth to increase healthy outcomes and Total Quality Management (TQM) issues.

By enlisting agencies in the Learning Network that serve 0-10 asset youth and by using TQM to develop organizational skills and systems, members improve their service to 0-10 asset youth, increasing the opportunity for those youth to build developmental assets.

The Learning Network design incorporates four stages: needs assessments of participating organizations, orientation, Learning Network sessions, and evaluation. Each Learning Network session incorporates:

- TQM tools/strategies
- Organizational overviews and tours of each agency in the Network
- Problem solving sessions around a critical organizational issue regarding their service to 0-10 asset youth either presented by the host agency or identified by Learning Network participants
- Member agency reports about TQM strategies/tools it has incorporated as a result of Learning Network participation
- Member agency reports about implementation of organizational challenge solutions

Results

To learn what was gained during the Learning Network experience and to improve future programs, both internal and external evaluation occurred. The ongoing evaluation activities included written input gathered from individual participants following each Learning Network session, a pre and post survey with each participant. Participation results for Learning Network organizations included:

- Positive impacts on attitudes and perceptions toward other organizations
- Affirmation about respondent's own organization
- Genuine/applicable solutions regarding organizational challenges
- New partnerships developed through networking

The majority of respondents felt that as a result of their participation in the Learning Network, their service to 0-10 asset youth improved. Ninety-two percent of respondents stated that their involvement in the Learning Network had a positive effect on their service to 0-10 asset youth. The Learning Network provided participants with the opportunity to build skills and knowledge in order to overcome barriers and work better

as collaborators, address challenges that were impeding their service to youth and practice/apply performance improvement strategies.

As a result of participating in the Learning Network, the following changes occurred:

- There was a positive shift in knowledge regarding services and scope of other organizations
- There was a gain in confidence, knowledge and ability to apply TQM strategies to improve organizational outcomes in the following areas:
 - Use of Data in Program Planning
 - Problem Solving
 - Managing Data
 - Communication
 - Strategic Planning
- There was a positive gain in knowledge about 0-10 asset youth
- There were intentional collaborations between Learning Network organizations in the following areas:
 - Program Services
 - Data Sharing
 - Community Workgroups/Committee Referrals
 - Management/Personnel Training
 - Communications/Marketing

Discoveries

- Organizational teams must have a clear understanding about why (purpose) they are participating and have clarified what they hope to change (outcome).
- Organizational teams must have a full commitment to attend all sessions to maximize learning and allot time for intentional on-the-job application.

Target

Nonprofit Human Service Organizations serving 0-10 or low asset youth

Search Institute's *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (PSL: AB)* survey is a measurement tool used to assess the extent to which youth experience assets and how the assets relate to their behavior.

Source

The Manufacturers Council of Grand Rapids, Michigan developed a training model based on total quality management principles that was used to highlight best practices in manufacturing and industry. Over 25 participating companies have used the model, called the "World Class Manufacturing Model" (hereafter referred to as the "industry-based training model"), as a tool for continuous improvement of their companies.

Organization

Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD)

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Organization Description

GLCYD's mission is to serve as the catalyst for the development of healthy youth in rural communities. GLCYD provides technical assistance and information to assist communities to improve the lives of their youth and families. A major focus of work is researching issues pertinent to rural youth and promoting continuous improvement in organizations that serve young people.

The program activities focus on fostering community partnerships to support youth and families, developing and sharing information on youth development, attaining prescribed asset measurements and identifying and promoting best practices in youth development. Activities that support the positive youth development effort include:

- Providing leadership for efforts to mobilize
- Providing, managing, and organizing data and information about youth
- Promoting innovative efforts that support best practice
- Enhancing coordination and partnership building
- Supporting and promoting youth and adult leadership development and community partnerships
- Recognizing exemplary efforts/achievements in the area of youth development
- Developing information products and services support organizations and increasing communities capacity to serve youth and their families