Moving Towards Organizational Best Practice

# Human Resources: Managing Performance Issues

The complex history of street intervention workers’ lives in addition to the traumatic stress of the job creates a ‘perfect storm’ for performance issues while employed. These issues may range from inconsistent attendance all the way to engaging in illegal activities (see section on Identity Crisis). The responses of street intervention workers did not reflect any patterns of responses among organizations when such incident occurred. Some shared that they were fired, others received unpaid time off and were told to “deal with your issues”. Only one worker shared a supportive response, when a staff member was arrested for illegal gun possession. In this instance, the staff member lost their job. The Executive Director, however, attended the court hearings and advocated on behalf of their former worker. Once they completed their prison sentence the Executive Director supported the worker in accessing counseling and other supportive services. This same worker was eventually rehired by the organization.

If and when staff struggle to fulfill their professional responsibilities, there is an opportunity for organizations to a) embody a healing-centered operative framework and b) respond in a way that doesn’t further harm the worker while minimizing risk for the organization. At the baseline of both components is creating a shared understanding of professional accountability within the organization that is reflected in multiple spaces of staff contact: hiring, team meetings, individual supervision, and regular work operations. Within the same dialogue, there should be a discussion of responses to instances where staff are not accountable to their professional role, their team, their organization, and the community they work within. While most organizations have performance management tools, they rely heavily on punitive frameworks and involve a gradient of penalties depending on the infraction. If an organization adopts an operational framework such as trauma-informed care or restorative justice practices, then responding to performance issues adapts to a gradient of healing-intensive measures. The most intense measure - release from employment - occurs when greater harm is done by keeping that individual in their place of employment than by letting them seek a healthier balance or employment opportunity elsewhere.

*I tell everybody, you always going to be tested, its going to be somebody that's very close to you that's going to suffer some trauma and how is you going to react to them? What's your reaction will be? Some of y'all are going to want to revert to the old person, some of y'all gonna go, stay positive and do the work, even though everybody going to be pulling your change to try to bring you back to the old you.*

It should be noted here, that operating like a ‘family’ has its benefits as well as drawbacks in these instances. Street intervention workers sometimes described their team dynamics as “like family”, exhibited by high levels of trust, bonding, and honesty among coworkers. This dynamic may create a supportive environment for some workers. However, it may elude other dimensions of organizational practice associated with the traumatic stress of street intervention work.

*Right now the state of outreach, I think that there's more of a trauma care lens in it and intentionality around connecting people within their own network of services. But, we're still missing a bar. You know what I mean? I think the trauma stuff that's infused in outreach right now is still mainly with our participants as the benefactors of it.*

Functioning like a family may prevent appropriate and adequate responses to performance issues, can lead to overworking and poor work/ life balance and boundaries, and even encourage semi-abusive treatment between supervisors and their staff. For this reason, the research team recommends a healing-centered operative framework- which may provide the similar benefits to a family-style system but without the negative side effects.

# Food for Thought

* + Does our organization have a protocol for managing performance issues with staff? Do our street intervention supervisors use this protocol, or are performance issues addressed in a more informal manner?
  + Does this protocol center worker wellness and healing-centered accountability?
  + To what extent are supervisors trained and supported in adhering to this protocol?
  + If our street intervention team draws from a family-based team framework, to what extent does this help or hinder team processes when a staff member is struggling?