WHAT COMES AFTER WHAT COMES FIRST?
LEADING EMPLOYMENT FIRST CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

By
Cary Griffin, Senior Partner
Griffin-Hammis Associates

Now that the majority of the states are adopting Employment First strategies, a key issue every community rehabilitation agency faces becomes ***"are we managing the unemployment problem or are we solving it?"***

In a country that spends over $50 billion a year on intellectual/developmental disability services, with less than 5% going to community employment, local agencies stretch every penny to adapt and rejuvenate. As in previous national systems change efforts, the emphasis is rightly placed on the technology of the day. In the current case, that technology is community employment. Rightly so, today's emphasis is largely on person-centered assessment techniques such as Discovery, proper job match, natural workplace supports, family engagement, better school to work linkages, etc. What gets lost in the push though is the focus on building foundational supports that maintain long-term success and emphasize community employment as a reasonable outcome for ***everyone***.

The most substantial national Employment First efforts, such as those led by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) at the U.S. Department of Labor, for instance, take a broad view of implementation. Most aspects of complex change are addressed systematically through training and technical assistance at the local level, through state and federal policy reform, funding strategy changes, and long range planning. And again, at the local level, most efforts focus on improving techniques for creating employment, engaging local business, and squeezing every penny from the system via local collaboration and economic leveraging. As expectations for employment become commonplace, the monumental task of creating local leadership and management frameworks becomes critical to solving the unemployment problem.

The chart below outlines the broad changes needed at the local level to sustain and critically improve career outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. The graphic illustrates the movement from often-insular rehabilitation programs, to organizations integrated within their communities, participating in the fabric of economic and social life. The transition requires substantive commitment, investment, and resourcefulness.

Organizational Transition to Employment 1st
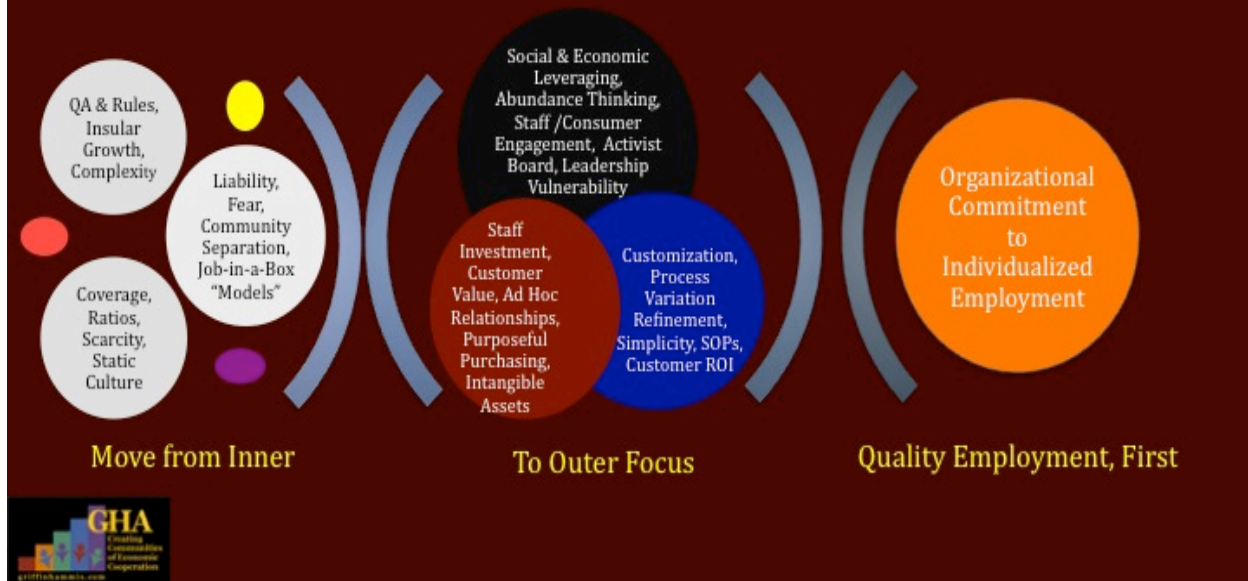
Our work with leadership teams and boards of directors across the country suggests the need for an intimate and thorough approach to stabilizing systems, identifying future leaders from inside and beyond an agency, fostering local collaborations, and teaching the skills necessary for change management and long-term growth. One of the common complaints from the Supported Employment Systems Change era is that supported employment became an add-on service to day programs and sheltered workshops. Employment First fails by definition if this result repeats.

The Leadership Mentoring Program is designed developmentally to both refine and incubate leadership skills at all levels of community-based agencies, with the mission of:

Developing a sustainable "no wrong door" approach to disability services & supports

Increasing daily efficiencies & resourcefulness

Generating new and/or expanded funding and social capital resources

Enhancing networked relationships for mutual gain

Leveraging and amalgamating new or improved community relationships

Extending staff tenure at all levels through internal customer service augmentation

Moving from a dependence culture to one that is adventuresome & leaderful

Embracing an Abundance culture

Increasing consumer-directed outcomes

The following organizational development "tiers" of the Leadership Mentoring Program establish new company cultures of change and leadership at all levels, while augmenting inventiveness and resourcefulness.

VALUES AND MISSION TIER. The core members of the organization's management team, along with representation from front line staff and consumers, receive consultative and training assistance in aligning the mission of all agency programs with the needs those served. Training integrates values and practice, streamlines management practices to move towards values coherence and achievement, analyze policy and procedure and initiate realignment to satisfy stated values-based and statutory organizational objectives. A variety of activities, consumer forums, presentations to various stakeholder groups, and one-to-one sessions move stated values and practice together.

COOPERATIVE CULTURE TIER. This tier blends with the previous tier by examining: team member/personnel interactions; how the unstated rules of an agency impact staff behavior; how behavior is reinforced or punished; decision-making processes and power relationships; how new or outside ideas and influences are generated, evaluated, promoted, avoided, or implemented. Over the course of the program, the influence of new techniques and an analysis of procedures and beliefs cause the Cooperative Culture to unfreeze, change, and refreeze to capture new organizational standards. Particular emphasis is given to creating "Leaderful Organizations and Communities" that collaboratively implement change and sustain progress.

MANAGEMENT/LEADERSHIP SKILLS TIER. Management/Leadership skills cannot be effectively taught and implemented in a frozen culture. This is why the preliminary tiers are introduced to open personnel to new ideas, methods, and outcomes. The management skills taught are based upon core protégé needs assessments and desires, and are based on the core competencies needed to leverage cooperation and to enhance disability employment and community support outcomes. Teaching management skills places a significant emphasis on the use of strategic and structural supports available to the managers that foster implementation success.

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES TIER. Executives, managers, Board members, consumers, and staff in all organizations are inundated with information. As such, consumers and professionals alike struggle to improve communication, negotiation, problem solving, and conflict management skills. This tier addresses a variety of methods for increasing the precision of communication to minimize misunderstanding and implementation delays; increases the use of simple quality improvement tools to clarify communication; and teaches efficacious approaches to conflict management that minimize crises and emphasizes

community and organizational mission accomplishment. Interactive teaching and relevant community rehabilitation case study is used extensively in this tier.

TEAM DEVELOPMENT TIER. This phase integrates values, culture and skills in an overlapping approach to team identity building, problem solving, consequence evaluation, quality improvement, and building trust and support among management, consumers, families, and direct service personnel. Most organizations operate through committees, not teams, where members represent their particular program, expertise, or policy territory. A true team uses its collective power to focus on a specific goal, collapsing programmatic barriers for the good of the whole.

SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CAPITAL TIER. The disability system has succeeded in erecting parallel systems throughout communities across the country. This situation demands ever-increasing amounts of energy, enforcement, and resources to maintain. Social and Economic capital creation lowers barriers between groups and emphasizes resourcefulness over resources, similarities over differences, and common ground over exclusivity. This tier explores the leveraged use of economic and political social capital to bridge differences between people and programs, and to create bonds between people often isolated from the mainstream of their communities. Social and Economic capital plays an ever-increasing role in the lives of people with disabilities, and in the sustainability of disability programs, their teams, and the efficacy of inclusion.

The road to Employment First is challenging, long, and ever changing. Building an organizational vehicle that responds to the demands and needs of that employment seeker sitting in the driver's seat requires attention to multiple and diverse considerations. Having a focused, intelligent, and cohesive team synchronizes the component parts, fostering arrival at career destinations in timely, reliable, and cost-effective fashion.

For more information on Leadership Mentoring, Management Systems refinement, and Customized Employment please contact Cary at cgriffin@griffinhammis.com and visit our website at griffinhammis.com for additional resources. Note that we regularly post new materials and training opportunities on the Griffin-Hammis Associates Facebook page.