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NOTE-TAKING METHODS AND IDEAS FOR COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Taking notes on your daily activities and projects can be an important way of collecting information on your agency and its community activities. These notes can also help you to keep track of your ideas and insights as you think about your work. Through systematic discussions with others in your agencies, by pooling the ideas and information contained in everyone's notes, and by thinking about the implications of these ideas/information, it is possible to use these notes in 1) improving the effectiveness of agency projects and activities, 2) writing reports for external funding agencies, 3) providing decision-makers (e,g., Board members) with useful information which can help in setting agency directions and priorities.

Some techniques of note-taking

> Take notes on the reactions of clients and community people which suggest successes and problems involved with agency activities.

> Highlight crucial successes and problems. Don"t take the time to write notes on every detail of your activities, but instead record those details, which seem to be interesting or provide special insights.

> Keep track of your ideas, as well as your observations. Your thoughts and ideas and about your work may sometimes be even more useful than your observations of "what happened," (However, it is even better if you can connect your ideas and your observations--for example, did something you noticed one day stimulate you to think about a better way of doing an ongoing program or activity?)

> After an important activity, write down just a sentence (or phrase) or two about what you feel was most worth noting. These brief notes can be used to jog your memory, later. At the end of the day, take a few minutes (say 15 minutes, for example) to go through these notes and fill in some more details and thoughts about them.

> Don't feel compelled to write about every activity, or even to write notes every day, but do try to get in the habit of writing notes on a regular basis, maybe at least three times a week, for 10 to 20 minutes each time.

> Take notes about a variety of different kinds of activities--sessions with clients, community programs, staff meetings, and informal conversations with people.

Discussing notes

> Coworkers can learn from each other by discussing the observations, ideas, problems, issues and questions raised in their notes with one another.

> These discussions may take place in formal staff meetings, or in informal conversations.

Note-taking

Uses of the notes and the discussions of the notes

to catalogue specific types of successes and accomplishments

to catalogue problems to be worked on and issues/questions to be addressed

to compare examples of ''success: and "failure" to better understand subtleties about when a particular activity works and when it doesn't. (For example, why does an activity work in some situations or for some clients but not for others?)

to discuss ways of improving existing programs, to identify gaps in agency services and activities, to develop new programs.

to discuss priority issues, not in the abstract, but in terms of specific experiences staff have had in trying to serve their communities.

to keep track of what you have learned through your work, and therefore, to help you think about what you understand less well and need to learn more about.

Examples of outcomes from taking notes. thinking about them and discussing them

Creation of a spirit of cooperation among staff in a shared effort to improve agency activities.

Intellectual stimulation for staff and mutual support/encouragement which can help to energize overworked staff people.

Develop a database for writing reports for funding agencies—a way of showing them you have done practical work and serious observation and careful thinking about your work. Notes based on your actual experience provide you with a way of giving them a tangible sense of what you are doing, and this is likely to convince them that you are serious and know what you are doing and what you are talking about.

An internal evaluation of agency programs which can be used to make decisions on how the agency's programs and activities can be further \ developed, and about possible new directions.