

Strategic Use of Consultants: An Interactive Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Leaders



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Voices From the Field

Implementing a Culture of Data

Program:

Southwest Human Development, Phoenix, AZ

Contact:

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Brief Program Description:

Southwest Human Development, founded in 1981, is Arizona's largest provider of services to young children, with more than 700 staff reaching 85,000 children and their families in Maricopa County each year. In 1984, the agency began providing comprehensive child development and family services to low-income children ages 3 to 5 and their families through its Southwest Head Start program. In 1995, the agency added Early Head Start (EHS) services for pregnant women and children from birth to age 3. Today, Southwest Early Head Start and Head Start is a 24-site program serving pregnant women and more than 1,200 children from birth to age 5 and their families.

Program Improvement Goal:

To implement a culture of data throughout the organization by

- developing a customized database that provides timely and accessible data and
- building staff capacity to use data effectively while delivering services to children and their families.

Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:

Southwest Human Development has a continuous improvement planning process where leaders regularly analyze the current landscape, develop short- and long-term goals, and revise the strategic plan. During this process, a number of needs emerged that upon closer examination could only be corrected if the organization improved key aspects of its data system. Prior to developing a T/TA plan to address this issue, the EHS and Head Start (HS) director established workgroups to clearly identify needs related to staff training, organization-wide communication, and the technical features of the new database. Workgroup members determined that a priority goal for the program



was to build the technology so that the data collection and synthesis could be cost effective and efficient. The director involved the governing body and Policy Council in this decision-making process, since the management team was hoping for a fundamental organizational shift around data use. Program leaders then assessed their internal capacity, reviewed their T/TA budget, and decided to bring in a consultant to improve the database and work with supervisors to plan and implement staff training on utilizing the new database to achieve goals. All of the workgroups' findings and recommendations were built into the consultant agreement to ensure clarity of expectations and improve the likelihood of success.

Consultant Qualifications:

The agency sought an experienced data consultant who could build a customized, Web-based database using MySQL database software, create a user-friendly Microsoft Access interface for the database, and work with supervisors to train program managers and staff on using the database.

Consultant's Work:

The agency created two separate contracts with the consultant. The first stipulated that the consultant build the new database with the specifications that staff had identified. The consultant spent 10 months doing this, in close collaboration with the EHS and HS director. After the consultant completed the database, a second contract was drawn up that specified that the consultant help lead a series of staff trainings in the effective use of the new database and software. The consultant partnered with members of the management team to co-facilitate these trainings, with the consultant focusing on the technical training in the database and software and the management team members focusing on the application of the data to improve program services. The consultant conducted approximately 10 trainings with program staff. The consultant also trained the agency's IT (information technology) staff person in maintaining and monitoring the database moving forward.

Outcomes:

- Program adopted a streamlined database that houses timely and accessible data on enrolled HS and EHS children and their families.
- Management team built its capacity to support staff in implementing the new data system by partnering with the consultant to provide site-based trainings for more than 300 program staff, including classroom teachers, family support specialists, and home visitors.
- Organization created a culture of data in which staff at all levels of the organization engage in data-driven decision-making.
- Program achieved the capacity to integrate school readiness and parent-family-community engagement plans.
- Organization developed a new home-based HS program for eligible children and their families after data revealed that many enrolled children had fragile medical conditions and could benefit from home-based services.

Advice to Others:

- **“Do your homework.”** While looking to find the best consultant to meet your organization’s needs, look to other leaders in the field and consider going outside the HS or EHS community. Before developing a contract, be sure to check the consultant’s résumé and references to learn whether previous agencies have been satisfied with the consultant’s work.
- **Clearly specify your agency’s needs.** “One of the most important things is to ensure you are very clear and specific—I call it ‘contracting and clarifying’—as to what you are wanting that consultant to do.” When goals and objectives are not clearly stated in the contract, it becomes very difficult for the consultant to meet the expectations of the HS organization.
- **“Build in some metrics.”** Any time you engage a consultant in your organization, be very clear about how you will be measuring achievement and success.
- **Identify the length and nature of the consulting relationship.** You should have some very specific reasons for why you’re hiring a consultant for the specified work, as opposed to creating a permanent position. The consultant should be meeting a short-term need in your organization. Clarifying a timeline for meeting that need will help make the consultative experience successful for both the consultant and the HS or EHS program.