

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



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Voices From the Field

Strengthening the Self-Assessment Process

Program:

Telamon Corporation, Raleigh, NC

Contact:

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Brief Program Description:

Since 1965, Telamon Corporation has provided supportive assistance to farmworkers and their families, children born into poverty, low-income and elderly residents living in rural America, and youth who struggle with societal challenges. Currently, Telamon manages programs in 12 states and operates three types of Head Start (HS) programs in Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, and Tennessee: HS, Early Head Start (EHS), and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. Telamon serves 5,342 children and their families, either directly or through delegate agencies.

Program Improvement Goal:

To develop a consistent and more comprehensive continuous-improvement approach to self-assessment among all of Telamon's HS programs and delegates while still allowing for some differences to meet the individual needs of programs.

Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:

Telamon is a large corporation in which locally based HS management teams typically develop policies and procedures suitable for their individual programs and the communities they serve. However in 2008, Telamon's corporate management determined that the programs' systems for self-assessment could be strengthened if all programs adopted a year-round, comprehensive, continuous improvement approach to self-assessment that utilized ongoing monitoring data to drive the program improvement process. The corporate management brought together all of the HS program directors to develop a new, organization-wide HS self-assessment process and then considered different strategies for implementing the new process while ensuring that all programs received the individualized support they needed. Migrant and Seasonal Head Start T/TA

contractors were utilized to provide feedback and assist in developing training around the new data-driven process. The new self-assessment process was piloted in the Michigan Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program. Based on that experience, Telamon management looked to the Michigan staff to coach and mentor staff in the other states on the new self-assessment process.

Consultant Qualifications:

While the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start T/TA contractors provided the model for data-analysis training, Telamon needed a way to replicate that training as staff turnover occurred. A training video on data analysis was produced, but because Telamon is a large, multi-state corporation, its management team decided to tap internal resources to find someone with the expertise to mentor those program staff who were assigned to lead the self-assessment process in their program. The Michigan Head Start program development coordinator was tapped because of her familiarity with HS programs, her experience with the new self-assessment process, her excellent communication and training skills, and her experience with data analysis and tracking.

Consultant's Work:

To build program capacity in the new self-assessment process, Telamon sent selected HS program staff from various states to Michigan for several days to receive individual training from the Michigan program coordinator and to observe program self-assessment in action. The Michigan program coordinator "walked" the trainees through the entire yearlong self-assessment cycle, detailing the various steps at each stage in the cycle. She demonstrated how to establish systems for tracking documentation, and she shared her program's self-assessment results from the previous year as an example. The trainees also were invited to observe a Michigan self-assessment planning meeting.

When reflecting on the experience, the mentor was quick to acknowledge how much she learned from others as a result of the mentoring experience. It was a win-win situation.

Outcomes:

- Implementation of an organization-wide self-assessment and continuous improvement process
- Increased ability among programs to use data effectively, analyze trends across programs, and share resources when common issues emerge
- The discovery by corporate management of the advantages of using internal talent to meet the T/TA needs of the agency; and corporate management's subsequent determination to continue to look for future opportunities to utilize internal talent to support change and improvement

Advice to Others:

- **Look internally for talent.** “In the past, we have not found it incredibly effective to bring someone in if they don’t know our program well. To be effective, consultants have to know the language of the program. I would advise all leaders from large programs to first look at their internal resources before spending money on outside consultants. Not only is this a wise use of program resources, but it provides a wonderful professional development experience for talented staff.”
- **Barter services and staff with other HS programs.** “In addition to using internal consultants and mentors, we have also engaged in an ‘exchange for services’ with other HS programs where we have ‘lent out’ some of our staff in exchange for borrowing specialized staff (e.g., health consultant) from another program. We would look to do that before we hired an external person.”
- **Facilitate reciprocal learning within your organization.** Using internal staff as mentors or “consultants” across the corporation helps to build collaborative professional relationships through reciprocal learning that strengthens all programs’ staff capacity.