

West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

Qualitative Evaluation Research Progress Report

April 1, 2005

Purpose of the study

The goal of this naturalistic case study was threefold: (1) to document and describe the partnership's planning year processes – particularly as they were understood and experienced by the participants themselves, (2) to provide helpful formative feedback to participants throughout the planning process, and (3) to analyze the planning year processes in relation to extant knowledge about effective community collaboration.

Methods

Data Collection: Over a twelve month period (February, 2004- February, 2005), we used participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and document analysis to generate data for the case study.

Participant Observation

- 4 quarterly partnership meetings
- 2 partnership retreats
- 7 work group meetings

Semi-structured Ethnographic Interviews

- 19 partners
- 7 PRC staff

Data Analysis: Throughout the year we have been engaged in ongoing inductive content analysis of the observation and interview data as well as other written documents produced by and for the partnership. At this point, we have coded all data (three notebooks full!) and are working on our final analysis.

Writing/Dissemination: Notes From the Field (two written, one oral) served as formative feedback to participants and served as member checks on our own emerging understandings of the planning year processes. We are now beginning to develop our final manuscript which we hope will be useful to other scholars in terms of adding to the body of knowledge about community collaboration. Also, we would like the work to be useful to practitioners, community members who are looking for information and ideas about effective cross-agency community collaboration.

Findings/Themes

Working Title: *Eyes on the Process: Honoring People and Relationships to Grow Authentic Community Collaboration*

1. Process as focus

A. In general, the partnership has been process-focused – at each step of the way, process itself has been a key consideration. (an organic, developmental approach - e.g., like gardening)

- not rushing things, allowing time
- moving/evolving/changing

B. PRC's collaborative leadership (protecting the process)

- enabling/facilitating individual autonomy *as well as* teamwork
- establishing democratic, participatory structures and procedures that are flexible, relaxed, and non-hierarchical
- valuing learning, reflecting, growing

CITE: “The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels.” (Senge, 1990: 4)

CITE: While it has been frustrating for some and has probably resulted in slower and more uneven progress in accomplishing tasks, the focus on process may bode well for the sustainability of the partnership. Johnson et al. (2004) contend that sustainability itself is a “change process” that is “ongoing and cyclical”, rather than a one-time event. (137)

2. People

The process has been deliberately and consciously focused on honoring people and the relationships between them.

Tremendous care was taken to find and then to develop and maintain relationships with the “right people”. That included the stakeholders (i.e., those representing as many state-level prevention organizations as possible), but it also meant:

- strong individuals who can also work as a team
- people open to learning/growth/process
- people committed to WV youth, families, and communities
- individuals working at high (but not appointed) levels in their organizations
- broadly inclusive
 - secular and faith based
 - youth
 - community
 - racial diversity
 - MU/WVU

CITE: This focus on people seems consistent with “the moral philosophy of personalism, a position which views persons and personal relationships as the starting point of social theory and practice. . . The dignity and value of the human person is at the center of personalist philosophy. . . [which also contends that] a human person flourishes only in relation to other human persons. . . It calls for community, not just as a collection of individuals, but as a unity of persons who relate consciously and experientially. . . [In other words], personalism works to promote solidarity in which all persons have full opportunity for participation.” (Whetstone, 2002:385-6)

3. Relationships

The process – and the PRC’s leadership of it – featured an emphasis on developing and strengthening trusting, respectful, reciprocal relationships as a foundation for developing shared understandings and a willingness to work together in more than a superficial (coordination-like) way – as people and as organizations.

A. Prior relationships as foundation

- Close, family-like relationships within PRC
- WV a small state making relationship-formation relatively easy
- Prior relationships among partners and between partners and PRC staff

B. New relationships formed

- Meeting/retreat activities
- Work-group meetings
- Fluidity of group and sub-group membership

CITE: Not unlike what Burk and Keeley (2002) learned from their study of a successful collaborative effort in an Appalachian community in Pennsylvania, it seems that while other factors played a role, “the close cooperation, respect, communication, and trust [between participants] . . . [was] the foundation upon which all else [was] built.”

4. Shared Vision

Not fully accomplished yet, but in process

A. Early and lasting agreement on broad, over-arching vision to collaboratively develop statewide system to promote community well-being.

B. Less agreement/clarity on other issues/goals

- prevention/intervention/treatment
- SIG planning grant
- SPF grant
- partnership and its role

CITE: This lack of shared vision is not surprising in light of literature on the difficulties of collaborative planning efforts. “Collaborative planning has its challenges. Cocreating a clear and challenging vision and developing shared meaning may cause stress [especially for] those newly involved in shared leadership.” (Phipps, 2004:87)

Perhaps the focus on process and letting it evolve gradually (through relationship building, developing operating procedures like by-laws, etc.) meant less time spent directly hashing out definitions of prevention (a lack of time tending that part of the garden?)

Alternatively, perhaps the focus on process has provided a strong foundation for future shared visions. In other words, the focus on process may have builds trusting relationships and values that enable consensus building, development of shared visions, and a comfortableness with learning, change, and growth.

5. Resources

Material, human, and social resources played a critical role in the success of the planning process.

6. Sustainability, Replicability, and other Issues

These are areas where we can mainly raise questions.

A. Can this type and level of statewide collaboration be sustained? Is this people-focused approach too hard on the people – (especially the PRC staff)?

B. Can this process-oriented process that is inherently unsystematic and unformulaic be replicated/institutionalized?

- in local or regional communities in WV?
- in communities elsewhere?

C. Could this be accomplished with a PRC?

D. Is this people and relationship-focused process related to something unique about WV or Appalachia?