

Chapter 4

Empowerment and the VR Supervisor/Manager

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the role the vocational rehabilitation (VR) supervisor plays to ensure that consumers of VR services are empowered throughout the VR process. Simply put, the VR supervisor must play the role of a leader. Supervisors are the first line of leadership in achieving any mission or vision. They set the tone for the office. Their attitudes, whether optimistic or pessimistic, passionate or apathetic, greatly impact the working environment and the counselors' attitude and perspective toward the mission and vision.

Self-determination, informed choice and empowerment are key principles and mandates within the Rehabilitation Act; and, as a whole, agencies have made inroads to make VR a consumer-oriented system. However, much has yet to be done, and all key stakeholders in the VR system should be focused on emphasizing empowerment in the VR process. This emphasis will require change at various levels and perspectives. Great change takes great leadership and leadership skills. In order to provide that leadership, supervisors will need to identify the mission, create a vision, communicate that vision, facilitate the work of the counselor, monitor progress and evaluate results.

There is a vast body of information, ideas and insights regarding leadership and leadership styles. This chapter describes some of the basic elements of leadership during times of change and leading toward a "vision of a world others want to belong to." The Primary Study Group (PSG) has drawn from historical figures (Abraham Lincoln), leaders in the field of VR (James Omvig) and authors who look at new ways to describe the art of leadership (Robert Dilts).

Be A Passionate, Compassionate Champion of Change

*Still the question recurs "can we do better?" The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As the case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. —Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership*, 1992, p. 137*

Understand the Mission

For the purpose of this chapter, the PSG will maintain that the agency's mission is to ensure that consumers of the VR program are empowered in achieving their goals of employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence and inclusion and integration into society.

The supervisor needs to fully understand this mission, what is meant by “empowered,” how it will translate into service delivery, and what changes in philosophy, attitude and skills on the part of all staff will be required. The supervisor should be able to clearly define and describe where the agency is going, how they will get there and how they will know when they have arrived.

Transition from a system-focused service delivery system to a consumer-focused profession will require significant change on a number of levels. A major responsibility that the supervisor accepts is not only being aware that change must take place, but also closely assessing the impact on staff. Supervisors should assure that counselors are not put at a disadvantage while they are adjusting to the new way of doing business. For example, when individuals seeking employment take the lead in making decisions, there may be times when they must be allowed to explore options in depth, to learn from experiences, or to work toward elevated goals. This will take additional time, and for counselors facing large caseloads and demands for quantitative outcomes, this additional time may create problems if the counselor is held to traditional performance standards.

Supervisors need to be tireless, have passion and drive and be enthusiastic proponents of change. They can make administrators and counselors alike see that the status quo, even if numbers are being met, is not good enough and that a philosophical shift toward consumer empowerment is vital.

Define and Model an Agency Vision of Consumer Empowerment

Create a Vision

Leadership is creating a world to which people want to belong. —Gilles Pajou, in *Dilts*, p .xi

At some point in our lives we have probably all felt the desire to “change the world” or to “make the world a better place.” This desire usually stems from a “vision that our lives or our world could be enriched or improved in some way.” Such visions of the future often provide guidance and direction for our lives and our work, furnishing the motivation and impetus for change. Visions that become shared by a number of people form the foundation of effective teamwork; and visions that become shared by multitudes constitute the basis for organization, culture and ultimately for the progress of civilizations. —Robert B. Dilts, 1996, p. xi.

Transforming the mission of empowerment into a vision that reflects the values and beliefs of consumers, counselors and all key stakeholders, that can be stated clearly and

concisely, and describes a reality worthy of achieving is the key to “creating a world to which others want to belong” (Dilts, 1996). This vision can be shared frequently and with passionate commitment to staff and consumers. As time goes by, it will be renewed and enriched by experience and insights. It is critical that the supervisor make the vision come alive so that it can be shared. Share the vision with passion and conviction, and it can be contagious.

Supervisors and managers committed to consumer empowerment espouse and convey a true belief in the capacity of persons with disabilities to learn and understand their choices, to make choices, and to be given the tools and encouragement to make their dreams reality. Ultimately, it is a basic necessity that our administrators, supervisors, counselors and all staff have a core belief that persons with disabilities, given proper training and opportunity, can be independent, compete on equal terms, and get good jobs! Supervisors should encourage open, frank discussions with counselors, possibly in informal group settings, regarding their thoughts and attitudes about consumers with disabilities in the world of employment.

Be An Essential Communication Link

His cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself, and allows nobody to see him; and by which he does not know what is going on in the very matter he is dealing with. Lincoln’s reason for relieving General John C. Fremont from his command in Missouri (September 9, 1861) —from Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership*, p. 13

It is being in touch, with customers, suppliers, your people. It facilitates innovation and makes possible the teaching of values to every member of an organization. Listening, facilitating, and teaching and reinforcing values. What is this except leadership? —Tom Peters and Nancy Austin in Phillips, 1992, p. 15

Communication is vital in the building of any relationship. A supervisor’s relationships include counselors, staff, consumers, consumer advocacy groups, administration and the public at large. As important as it is to communicate the vision to these audiences, it is equally important to listen.

• With Counselors

Communication around the vision should be frequent and is best accomplished in the environment where the realization of the vision occurs. The supervisor brings the vision to the people where they work. As Phillips describes in his book *Lincoln on Leadership*, “During his four years as president Abraham Lincoln spent most of his time among the troops. They were number one to him; they were the people who were going to get the job done.” (p.13) Lincoln

literally brought his vision to the men in the trenches, in the boats and battlefield. Talking to counselors in their work setting allows the supervisor to discover firsthand how the counselors support empowerment of the consumer. Conversation regarding everyday interactions with consumers allows the supervisor to share ideas and clarify expectations regarding empowerment. The more comfortable and familiar the counselor is with the supervisor's expectations and how he/she would handle a situation, the more they can confidently make their own decisions and serve consumers without hesitations or delays.

This same approach can be used in staff meetings and with consumer groups, or any other partners and organizations that are involved in serving consumers.

I recently stopped by the office of one of my counselors who was struggling with one of his consumers. This particular consumer has numerous abilities, but little insight to his disability issues. The consumer's past work history is significant in the fact that jobs he held only lasted several months, or even just a few weeks. I encouraged the counselor to explore with the consumer the reason for the short duration of the previous jobs. I felt it was important for the consumer to explore past jobs that worked well for him and his current interests. The counselor felt it would be helpful for the consumer to try a community based assessment in order to experience a variety of jobs in the community before making a commitment. I discussed with the counselor that once the consumer found an area he was interested in and would require further training, then suggest that he take one course in that area as a form of self-assessment. The brief work experience and information from taking the course will give the consumer more complete information, necessary to make an informed decision. The counselor also noted that the consumer appears to have self-esteem issues and anxiety about interpersonal relationships. The counselor had seen a flier about a new program in the community that links individuals with mental health issues with peer volunteers in the community to develop communication skills, interact socially and develop self-esteem. I complimented the counselor for looking outside of the agency for alternative resources that can help the consumer address his disability issues and form additional supports. —Glenn K, VR Supervisor

When a consumer successfully reaches his or her employment goal, it provides the counselor with a sense of accomplishment. It helps to reassure the counselor that what they do makes a difference. However, there are going to be days when things do not fall into place. Counselors can become discouraged when they feel that the failures appear to outweigh the successes they experience. As a supervisor I feel it is important to help staff maintain a positive outlook. One

way an office can accomplish this is by sharing success stories among each other. Taking time during the counselor meeting to discuss consumer achievements is one way I can encourage this. This not only helps build a sense of accomplishment, but also allows counselors to share strategies that have worked for them. —Maria S., VR Supervisor

- ***With Administration***

VR front line supervisors need to make administration/upper management aware of the reality of the situation and keep them informed of how the practice of empowering consumers is impacting both the counselors and the consumer. Ongoing monitoring will be necessary and will allow supervisors to recommend needed changes that will benefit the individuals seeking employment, counselors and, eventually, the system. It is extremely important that we understand that if change is to be effective, it will need to occur at all levels.

- ***With the Disability Community***

Supervisors need to encourage partnerships between their agencies and consumers, particularly through affiliations with organized consumer groups and immersion experiences with persons with disabilities. Counselors should be encouraged and rewarded for seeking out a deeper understanding of consumer needs and expectations through immersion experiences and advocacy. There are a variety of ways that counselors can get involved on a regular basis.

In our community, for example, there are monthly Mental Health Task Force meetings that discuss disability issues. There are numerous ceremonies that recognize individuals with disabilities that have overcome significant barriers. Counselors are encouraged to share articles of accomplishments of present/past consumers that are recognized in the area. The centers for independent living are another excellent way to connect with the disability community. We need to maintain the philosophy that people we serve have abundant potential. This not only helps the counselor maintain a positive attitude, but also feeds the consumer's ability to reach beyond their assumed limitations. —Roger N., VR Supervisor

Ensure the Practice of True Informed Choice

He lifted people out of their everyday selves and into a higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness. He obtained extraordinary results from ordinary people by instilling purpose in their endeavors. —Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership*, 1992, p. 173

Streamline Procedures

The supervisor's job is to provide counselors the work environment, supports, procedures, training and feedback they require to perform their job. VR supervisors and managers are encouraged to work together with counselors and other agency staff to truly streamline purely bureaucratic procedures and paperwork. The practice of empowering individuals within the VR process can take more time; streamlining the procedures and paperwork for purchasing services will allow the counselor more time for developing quality relationships with consumers that foster empowerment, trust and informed choice. Streamlined procedures also allow counselors the time to perform the other functions and activities that create a community environment in which more quality employment opportunities exist.

Beyond the streamlining of procedures, other administrative issues must be addressed by the supervisor. Issues involving the acquisition of services, training, equipment and preferred vendors must be addressed so that counselors will be able to obtain the goods and services preferred by consumers, in a timely manner.

Promote Ongoing Education for Staff

VR supervisors should have, and should also ensure that their counselors possess, comprehensive knowledge specifically related to the barriers faced by consumers with disabilities in preparing for, obtaining and maintaining employment. Education needs to be updated and current and should come from a variety of sources, including university programs, personal experience, work experience and, of course, from consumers with disabilities themselves.

Hire Qualified Staff with Positive Attitudes and High Expectations

When interviewing and selecting prospective new staff, supervisors should be encouraged to place an emphasis on seeking out persons not only with credentials and experience, but who also have a genuine belief that individuals with disabilities are capable of independence, making decisions for themselves and performing well at good jobs. Questions related to such positive beliefs and attitudes can be included in the interview. Moreover, while it is not a requirement, it is also now widely accepted that an emphasis should be placed on hiring qualified individuals with disabilities as VR counselors. Qualified counselors who themselves have disabilities can often serve as positive role models for consumers of the VR program. They have experience that in many cases makes them uniquely qualified to understand, encourage and educate new VR consumers as they work toward their goals of independence and employment. In any case, the recruitment and selection of VR staff, whether disabled or not, is critical to the implementation of consumer empowerment.

Lead Counselors in the Practice of True Informed Choice

Supervisors need to work with counselors to ensure that VR consumers are treated with dignity and respect – as an equal partner with the service provider (Omvig, 2002). The Rehabilitation Act requires that consumers be given the information necessary to make decisions regarding their vocational goals and the broad range of services to achieve those goals (Section 102(d)(4)). In fact, counselors might encourage consumers to create their own Individualized Plans for Employment (IPEs), while also holding consumers responsible for working to carry them out, with support where needed. VR supervisors need to help counselors understand that they still have a crucial professional role to play in the development of the IPE and in informed choice. The consumers they work with, particularly consumers who are new to the VR system, will often come to them with no belief in their own capacities to become independent, empowered, employed individuals. As Omvig (2002) states, “The employees of the quality service provider – those with the ‘empowerment motive’ – must teach and lead and demonstrate and persuade in order to help elevate the new VR customer’s expectations...” (p. 58). It is essential for counselors to provide not only information, but also real, continued encouragement to consumers to develop an empowered perspective as they set, work toward and ultimately achieve their goals. VR supervisors need to believe in and reward this effort.

Monitor and Evaluate

All leaders must seek and require access to reliable and up-to-date information.
—Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership*, 1992, p. 21

• *Customer Satisfaction*

It is very important that VR supervisors and other managers continuously assess their programs to make sure empowerment is practiced. Supervisors can achieve this by reviewing case files and adding questions to satisfaction surveys that allow individuals seeking employment to give feedback on whether or not they feel they are taking a lead role in their rehabilitation programming. Public forums or one-on-one meetings with consumers should be commonplace and readily accessible to consumers so that their voices can be heard and they can play a role in needed changes.

• *Rethink the Performance Evaluation*

Supervisors are encouraged to advocate for a new system of staff performance evaluation that supports consumer empowerment. They might avoid using performance tools that are disproportionately focused on numbers (closures, eligibilities, etc.) and lean toward a performance tool that is more consumer satisfaction and dialogue oriented. This form of performance assessment tool will allow the supervisor to focus on the counselor's outcomes that may not have resulted in traditional employment outcomes, but did have a positive impact on an individual consumer's rehabilitation program. Performance standards can be written to include

qualifiers and quantifiers that encourage consumer empowerment. IPEs and narrative entries can be assessed to determine positive outcomes from the consumer's perspective.

While doing case file reviews, I noticed that counselors were initiating planning, but in some cases it appeared that the consumers had little, if any, input. In order to assess the situation, a survey was developed and sent to all consumers that were in service statuses. Multiple surveys were returned indicating that consumers felt they were not allowed to make important decisions concerning services they were receiving. In an effort to improve the situation, I arranged a training session on consumer empowerment for counselors. Following the training several meetings were held to discuss the agency's expectations and agree on a plan of action that would shift more decision-making to the consumer. I also introduced a new system that required the consumer and the counselor to outline services being provided in progress reviews and the consumer would also indicate whether he/she felt that his/her wishes and rights were respected. The form was signed and dated by both consumer and counselor. I also created a consumer advisory committee and requested that they look at parts of the service delivery system and share their perspectives concerning possible changes that could be made to encourage involvement and assure consumer empowerment. —Trudy J., VR Supervisor

Conclusion

Professional VR supervisors and managers will play several challenging key roles in the newly consumer-driven and empowered VR program. As detailed in the chapter, it is essential that supervisors and managers understand the mission of the program, create a vision, act as an essential communication link, ensure the practice of true informed choice, and monitor and evaluate results. As part of this process, they may encourage and tirelessly work for drastic changes in long-standing agency philosophy and practices where needed, while remaining sensitive to the needs of counselors and meeting the demands from upper management and federal policymakers. They continually monitor the changes to ensure that positive outcomes result for the consumer, counselor and program. They need to recruit and attract the best and the brightest, people with positive attitudes and philosophies about the consumers with whom they work. They need to ensure that information and feedback flow as smoothly as possible among and between the various stakeholders - administrators, counselors and consumers. They need to empower counselors by doing their best to streamline procedures, eliminating unnecessary work and freeing up time to focus on the true goal of the VR program as specified by the Rehabilitation Act, Section 2(b)(1): the empowerment of individuals with disabilities to maximize employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, inclusion and integration into society.

Study Questions

1. **A major responsibility that the supervisor must accept in the empowerment process is not only being aware that change must take place, but also to closely assess the impact on staff.**
True False
2. **Detailed memos and manuals are the best media through which a supervisor can convey his/her expectations regarding empowering practices to staff.**
True False
3. **Empowerment requires more emphasis on a system-focused service delivery system.**
True False
4. **In this chapter, examples of ways VR supervisors can promote empowerment include:**
 - (a) Encouraging administration to rethink the components of the performance appraisal
 - (b) Streamlining procedures wherever possible
 - (c) Hiring counselors with positive attitudes and elevated expectations
 - (d) (a) & (b)
 - (e) All of the above
5. **According to this chapter, in order to monitor consumer empowerment in the VR process, supervisors can review case files, do satisfaction surveys, and**
 - (a) Count the number of competitive employment outcomes
 - (b) Hold one-on-one meetings or public forums with consumers
 - (c) Join professional organizations
 - (d) Both (a) & (b)
 - (e) None of the above