

The Transitional Work Corporation-Managing For Better Outcomes Part 2: Implementation Issues

**By William Eimicke and Steven Cohen
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By early October 2001, the team-based reorganization of TWC had been operational for three months. All the key performance indicators had improved. The feedback Greenwald received from his senior staff was quite positive. And, as he managed by walking around the floors of TWC, chatting in the lunchroom and talking around the coffeepot, he heard mostly good things and generally saw smiling faces.

While he was relatively certain these positive signs were accurate, Greenwald realized the information reaching him might be filtered, biased toward the good news and was most likely incomplete. So, he asked one of his regular consultants, Professor Eimicke of Columbia University, to conduct a series of confidential interviews with a wide array of senior, mid-level and line staff, as well as participants, to get a sense of how well the new structure was working. Eimicke had been working with TWC on a wide variety of projects since the doors opened in September 1998, so there was a level of staff familiarity and trust that transcended his friendship with Greenwald. Most people at TWC had learned from experience that they could rely on Eimicke to accurately report their observations without revealing who said what.

During the month of October, Eimicke conducted 30 one-on-one, in-person, hour-long interviews. The questions were deliberately general, designed to encourage the person interviewed to talk about their concerns, rather than agree or disagree with management's assessment of TWC and the recent "reorg". A number of general comments and specific concerns emerged when the data from the interviews were compiled and analyzed.

Most of the people interviewed said that they continued to work at TWC primarily because of their strong identification with the mission of the organization—helping people move from dependency toward self-sufficiency and self-respect through employment. Second, the vast majority indicated they were able to continue to function in an often stressful and chaotic endeavor through the support of the family atmosphere and culture of working together that existed at TWC. Third, virtually everyone interviewed felt that failures and gaps in communication was the biggest obstacle to TWC's success.

The new, team-based structure was identified by most of those interviewed as the best hope of overcoming the communications issue and for improving TWC's key performance indicators. There was also a strong degree of optimism that TWC would continue to perform well and improve its placement and retention numbers. The major concerns raised focused on issues that the reorganization was designed to overcome:

- The organization was still characterized as "stove-piped", with gaps in communication and workflow problems, particularly between the orientation team and the employment teams.

- Many of those interviewed expressed concern that permanent placement and job retention was not perceived as job #1 by many in the organization.
- A desire for more training and confusion regarding the requirements of the new job titles and team assignments.
- Communication problems with transitional work site partners.

Several of those interviewed raised the problems encountered by the new employment pod leaders. Subsequently, Eimicke learned that Director of Operations John Gerhard had heard the same concerns from the directors of the employment division and individual pod leaders. After several discussions with Greenwald and the employment team representatives, it was decided that an off-site workshop limited to the five pod leaders and the division director and deputy director made sense. Greenwald, Gerhard, several board members and an outside facilitator would also be present.

What came out of the November 2001 retreat workshop made it clear that work on the reorganization was far from over. Pod leaders felt they had the responsibility but not the authority to lead. Management gave them directions but often did not explain the rationale. Meetings were filled with information and directives but there was no time for fact-finding. They were confused about the roles of the employment director and deputy director.

Pod leaders felt the members of the various pods were not balanced in talent terms and the chemistry within each team could be better. They were not involved in selecting the members of their teams and attributed the balance and chemistry issues to that decision. There was a strong desire for additional training on leadership, time management, diversity and issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. Pod leaders also requested the creation of an agency-wide crisis task force to deal with special needs of participants such as substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness.

With the emphasis on performance indicators down to the pod level, pods were competing for placements rather than cooperating to maximize the total placements for the organization. The consequence was that job leads were not routinely shared among pods. Pod leaders were also confused by the wide array of performance indicators. They all knew placements were important. Beyond that, they were uncertain.

The impact of the session was quite positive. Management was willing to devote time and energy to their issues and grant amnesty to complaints raised. And it was agreed to meet again in two months to assess progress.

Upon learning of the excitement and energy coming out of the pod leaders' retreat, Patience Lehrman, director of the orientation team, asked Greenwald for a similar workshop for her team. He readily agreed. The day was set for January 9, 2002. Greenwald, Gerhard, the same board members and the same facilitator would participate, as they had done with the pod leaders.

The orientation team was a little different than the employment pods. Orientation is one large team of about 20 people. Employment pods are about half that size and each of the five pods has a leader. There is also a division director and deputy director. Patience Lehrman is the only official “leader” of the orientation team but it is a team of very strong individuals. Only the leaders attended the employment retreat. Every member of the orientation team attended their retreat.

The session with the orientation team also went very well. As it turned out, many of the internal management issues had been ironed out among the members of the team and Lehrman before the retreat. It was a rough process, with a great deal of debate but by the day of the retreat Lehrman and her team were filled with spirit and completely sold on the team approach.

The issues coming out of the orientation retreat included a number of typical organizational concerns such as sick days, bonus procedures, promotional opportunities and information processing that Greenwald already was scheduled to address with the entire TWC staff. The orientation specific challenges were limited but important:

- How to better address the special needs of participants, including issues such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness and homelessness; and
- Communication and case management between the orientation team and the employment pods.

It was agreed that a meeting would be set up in the near future with representatives from employment and orientation to seek to resolve the coordination issues that had developed since the “reorg”. To address the special needs problem, a number of ideas were discussed: bringing treatment specialists in-house; hiring additional assessments specialists; better communication among orientation team member; and more opportunities for participants to discuss their issues. Since special needs issues also affect the employment pods, it was agreed to put this issue on the agenda for the employment/orientation joint session. As with the pod leaders’ retreat, management agreed to set up a follow-up meeting in two months to assess progress on the challenges raised by the orientation team.

How to Respond

As Greenwald walked back from the University of Pennsylvania campus on a rainy and cold late afternoon on January 9, the positive energy of the orientation team and how well the “reorg” seemed to be going encouraged him. He thought back to his walk after the June retreat and the doubts he had that afternoon.

He no longer wondered whether the team approach was correct. The implementation phase was proceeding much better than he could have hoped. Still, there were serious issues. Is there a way to improve communication and coordination between the employment and orientation teams? Should he consider providing more special needs services in-house? And how can he demonstrate that the improvements in the TWC performance indicators are related to the beneficial impact of the team-based structure?