DEEP DIVE

SYSTEM ASSESSMENTS

Ongoing and inclusive assessments of the system by staff, young people, family members and community and system leaders are central to assessing the current system and to understanding where attention and improvement is needed.

Participatory assessments can help leadership and partners to understand and respond collaboratively to practical needs for reform and challenges as reform progresses and to monitor the success of organizational culture change in action.

This Deep Dive offers a number of practical suggestions for how to structure and utilize participatory assessments to advance system transformation, and is especially relevant to the culture change process detailed in *Changing Organizational Culture to Align with Vision and Values.*

Categories of Assessment

Agency culture, and its effect on young people, is often reflected in subtle interactions. Therefore, participatory assessments might begin by assessing the daily routines of and interactions between staff members and young people or their families. Youth justice leaders might use assessments to ask each staff member, young person and family member to share their feelings on the quality of their relationships with others in the system, providing a rating scale as well as room for comments, questions and suggestions. Some initial areas to explore might include:

1 **What is the quality of interactions between staff and young people?**

Do staff use young peoples' first names, ask them how they're doing and ask what's wrong when a young person misbehaves—recognizing that behavior as signs of a young person's challenges rather than merely defiance? Do young people ask staff questions, express concerns and discuss their personal goals? Does staff treatment of youth vary by race, ethnicity, gender or other factors?

- In addition to these examples, this question might ask young people and staff to rate the quality of their interactions on a numerical scale and ask for examples of when they feel supported and when they feel frustrated with one another.

- Leaders might also consider these questions alongside their own observations, data on issues such as the number of disciplinary infractions or instances of collaborative problem solving.

2 **What is the quality of interactions between staff and families?**

Do staff welcome family members, provide an opportunity to address questions and invite families to share concerns or suggestions? Do family members use staff members' names and consider their feedback, hear details from staff about how their loved ones are doing and feel like they know who to approach with questions?

- In addition to inviting ratings and feedback from staff and family members, leaders might also note whether staff provide a welcome or merely recite the rules when family members arrive; if and how interactions between staff and young people change when family members are present; and how staff members address family members' questions or concerns, such as sharing them with supervisors or discussing policy suggestions.

- While probing these questions, leaders might consider how agency structure can support values in action. For instance, are some staff assigned to welcome, interact with and address questions and concerns from families? Or would it be beneficial to emphasize these skills and provide relevant training to all staff members? Throughout systems and culture change leaders can consider how best to assign roles and responsibilities for consistent and effective policy implementation.

3 **What is the quality of interactions between staff members and between staff and supervisors?**

Is there general camaraderie and room for discussion, questions or suggestions? Do staff and supervisors share concerns about or from young people and families? Do staff feel like their concerns are taken seriously and addressed where possible by supervisors?

■ Youth justice leaders might note if there is general collaboration between staff and between staff and supervisors, including problem solving around young peoples' needs or revising policies; if staff ask questions of their supervisors, or merely respond to or decline orders; and if staff interact with each other or young people differently when supervisors are present.

■ Youth justice leaders can also be conscious of their positionality and that there is likely to be feedback about their role and interactions with staff as well. Ensuring anonymity of surveys and relying on a diverse review team can help to garner honest insight from staff.

4 **What message does the physical design of the agency or specific facility send to staff, young people and families?**

Is there a welcome sign at the entrance? Are signs listing the agency's rules complemented by signs listing the agency's values? Is the visitation room set up in a comfortable way for young people to see their loved ones? Do staff members have a comfortable place to take breaks and eat together? Are there conference rooms for confidential conversations between staff and supervisors, and between staff and family members?

■ Interactions can also be shaped significantly by the physical environment. Leaders might consider how changes in the physical environment can better reflect and build a culture focused on safety, resilience, partnership and well-being.

These types of assessments, with targeted questions and feedback from all members of an agency, and the young people and families who experience the system daily can help to probe underlying assumptions and narratives that may not serve shared values and goals. For example, staff members might believe that young people are defined by their offenses rather than considering them as

a whole person and that they are a compilation of their experiences, strengths, challenges and potential. These assessments can also help to reveal if young people feel like staff are sources of trust and mentorship or are merely there to enforce the rules, and whether frontline staff feel supported by supervisors in addressing on-the-job challenges. In addition to asking staff, young people and families for their thoughts on these questions, youth justice leaders and the review team can also consider their own observations of interactions, including language used, topics discussed and body language.

Discussing and Using Assessment Results

Once assessments are completed it is important that all participants, including staff, youth and families, have a forum for discussing the information gathered and for leadership to interact with these stakeholders to better understand the data collected, ask clarifying questions and seek input on ways to remedy remaining conflicts, tensions and problems in current practice.

Review teams, if inclusive, can serve as an excellent forum for these discussions. In addition to considering the results of qualitative assessments, and how the quality and nuances of interactions affect and reflect culture, staff can also examine feedback gathered in assessments from staff, young people and families alongside quantitative data. More on quantitative data is discussed in the chapter on *Turning Data into Action.* For instance, fostering educational opportunities for young people is an important goal for any agency. If data reveals that graduation rates have stagnated in recent years, staff and young people might share insight into why this is occurring, such as program limitations or scheduling conflicts, limited recruitment efforts or enrollment capacity or misaligned curricula between the agency and the Department of Education.

Relatedly, staff might be motivated to invest in educational programming for young people but feel that they lack the necessary training or resources to do so effectively. Moreover, if outside of the classroom there is an emphasis on discipline, this might limit an inquisitive and collaborative culture within the classroom. Offering training—potentially in collaboration with the Department of Education or another external partner—that strengthens staff members' ability to teach, tutor or mentor can support young people's educational goals, improve wider agency culture and equip staff with transferable skills they can harness in areas of youth development outside of the justice system. ■

TAKING ON TRANSFORMATION