

By Anna Scott

Organizational Rx

Investment in coaching generates great results for health plan

Surviving in today's marketplace is tough for any organization – no matter what the size and no matter what the industry, especially in the uncertain world of today's healthcare industry in America. Non-profits face even more challenges than their for-profit counterparts. And although the U.S. Healthcare Reform Bill has passed, real changes won't happen overnight. Federal and state funding have been reduced, program benefits have been eliminated, yet the needs of the communities these organizations serve grow ever greater.

Alameda Alliance for Health (the Alliance), a not-for-profit, state-licensed health plan based in Alameda

“Morale and productivity were low, and some service levels needed improvement.”

County, California, faces all these challenges and much more. As an organization dedicated to caring for the underserved – from low-income children to the disenfranchised elderly – the Alliance cares for the health of the neediest and often forgotten in society – and does so against a backdrop of increasing regulations and decreasing dollars for programs and services.

The Challenges

The challenges for the Alliance began around 2005, the same time California began facing an unprecedented budgetary crisis. Ingrid Lamirault, chief executive officer, admits that at that time, the organization was in chaos. She had just joined the Alliance and was in the midst of a significant restructuring effort to put basic business prac-



tices in place. The Alliance had been forced to lay off several of its staff. Morale was low, and productivity and some service levels needed improvement. The staff faced increasing demands and burdens, and were even more vital than ever to the mission of the Alliance.

Lamirault knew that in order to continue to serve its constituents well, the Alliance needed to build and sustain core leadership skills, as well as the commitment and dedication of employees. She knew that reaching such a goal would be difficult in the challenging times they were facing because employees were less productive and less focused, and more worried about their own lives. At a time when other organizations were slashing budgets, Lamirault decided the best investment she could make was in her employees, through coaching.

The Solution

Lamirault also wanted coaching open to a broad range of employees – not just senior management or those with degrees, but to anyone who played a vital role in the organization and who had the potential to grow and bring further value to the Alliance. Lamirault made the decision cautiously and strategically, with an eye on costs and rewards. She decided what she most wanted coaching to help her achieve was the ability to:

Reproduced with the permission of choice Magazine, www.choice-online.com

Reproduced with the permission of choice Magazine, www.choice-online.com

The Library is Here!

LIBRARY OF PROFESSIONAL COACHING

www.libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com

An Internet-based center that provides access to a carefully selected set of resources associated with the field and discipline of professional coaching.



www.libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com

BECOME A MEMBER

JOIN TODAY!

MEMBER OPTIONS:
DAY, MONTH,
OR YEAR.

**ACCESS THE WHOLE
LIBRARY FOR LESS
THAN \$10!**

impact

- ✓ Retain valuable employees
- ✓ Build the skills of promising employees
- ✓ Increase leadership skills
- ✓ Help employees better identify conflict resolution techniques
- ✓ Increase job satisfaction
- ✓ Enhance employee work and life balance
- ✓ Improve the programs and services provided to the community.

In 2005, Lamirault began taking an interest in coaching and knew finding the right coach was crucial to success. When we met and decided to move forward, we agreed that the focus needed to be on helping people become more aware of their

tions. CEO Lamirault knew Danny had much to give and that losing his skills and commitment would be a loss for the organization.

Danny recalls that the first coach he worked with was good, but followed more of a textbook approach. In addition, the coach focused on finding out what Danny's coworkers thought of him. "I didn't like getting a list of things people didn't like about me, how horrible someone thought I was," he recalls. "I know it was supposed to be part of an exercise, but it just made me feel bad about myself and made me very uncomfortable around my colleagues." Despite his misgivings, Danny stuck with it

"The Alliance estimates that coaching has provided a quantifiable ROI at a number of levels."

day-to-day actions that may be impeding or stopping them from achieving the results they want. If employees can make progress on that single concept, they can become more successful and the organization ultimately wins.

The Experience

1. Improving Skills

The primary focus of my coaching with the Alliance team was on helping good employees get better. Typical of the experience was that of Danny Fortson, a member of the IT department who had been with the Alliance for 11 years. He was bright, hardworking and dedicated to his job, yet his coping skills weren't fully developed to adequately handle team interactions, especially in stressful situa-

and within a few months says he felt "cured." He has since been promoted several times and is now the director of business operations.

Danny notes that what he has learned in coaching at work has affected every area of his life, from his interactions with his children and wife to those outside of work. "It is a life-changing experience," he exclaims. "I volunteer with the deaf in our community and because of coaching I've increased my commitment to serving others outside of work."

2. Standing Up for Yourself

In 2005, Amanda "Mandy" Flores-Witte had been with the Alliance for two years and already held three positions during this time. She was one of the first to become involved

in coaching. After a promotion, Lamirault came to Mandy to tell her she thought coaching would be beneficial. “I was so pleased to be considered,” recalls Mandy. “I had written a few papers on executive coaching while getting my Masters and jumped at the chance.”

Mandy enjoyed the coaching experience and believed it helped her grow. Yet within a few years, she felt she might be forced to leave her job. She and her husband had decided to adopt a child. The time involved in an international adoption, combined with her demanding job, were creating pressures and frustrations. “I valued my job and wanted to make sure I was doing it well, but I had decided I really wanted to start a family and I just couldn’t figure out how to combine the two.”

Mandy hadn’t thought of bringing this personal situation to my attention as her coach, but after a particularly troubling day, she blurted out her frustrations. Mandy recalls that coaching helped her prioritize what she really wanted – both professionally and personally. “I realized that as much as I wanted a family, I also wanted to keep working,” says Mandy. “This experience gave me the tools to evaluate and strategize, and the confidence to lay out options for my boss to consider.”

Mandy went directly to CEO Lamirault, spelled out her strengths and the value she brought to the organization, and made some suggestions as to how she could continue to work. Even though there were no executives working part-time, Lamirault agreed to this arrangement. Today, Mandy is part of the senior management team and continues her coaching as needed. She and her husband have a

happy, healthy little girl and she is happy with her work and life balance.

The Lessons

While several individual successes have been achieved by employees at the Alliance, it was determined that coaching wasn’t for everyone.

“This experience gave me the tools to evaluate and strategize, and the confidence to lay out options for my boss to consider.”

“Coaching has to be a two-way street,” says Lamirault. “We’ve had some significant results, but it’s not going to work for everyone. You have to be open and willing to change.”

Often the biggest indicator of a successful coaching candidate isn’t their education, age or even personality. It is their desire to grow and change. Change goes against our biology. Human beings like to stay at the status quo. There must be a desire, fear or pain, or people won’t be willing to change.

The Results

Lamirault and her management team believe coaching has produced a number of significant benefits for the organization, including:

- ✓ A greater sense of teamwork and collaboration
- ✓ A more open atmosphere for communication of ideas
- ✓ New ideas and solutions
- ✓ More knowledgeable employees and leadership skills
- ✓ A more positive spirit and energy within the organization
- ✓ Employees who can identify and better use their own strengths

✓ Tools that assist employees to be more effective in their jobs.

Of course, the key for any organization in today’s market is cost. The Alliance estimates that coaching has provided a quantifiable ROI at a number of levels. For example, the ability to promote people from

within as opposed to externally has saved at least \$70,000 over the past few years. In addition, the Alliance’s retention rate is exceptionally high – even factoring in the current economy. The organization’s voluntary turnover rate between July 1 and December 30, 2009 was four percent. The Alliance’s stated goal for voluntary turnovers is 10 percent. A study by Cigna Behavioral Health found that turnover cost was 120 to 200 percent of salary per employee. In addition, it takes an average of 13.5 months for new employees to reach maximum efficiency. Therefore, cost savings through retention amounts to thousands of dollars a year.

Most importantly for the Alliance, coaching helps to ensure it provides optimal service to its members.

“We did this not only to help our employees, but also to ensure that we could better serve our constituents,” notes Lamirault. “Our most important mission is to serve our members, and the best way to do that is with a compassionate, productive and collaborative workforce.” •