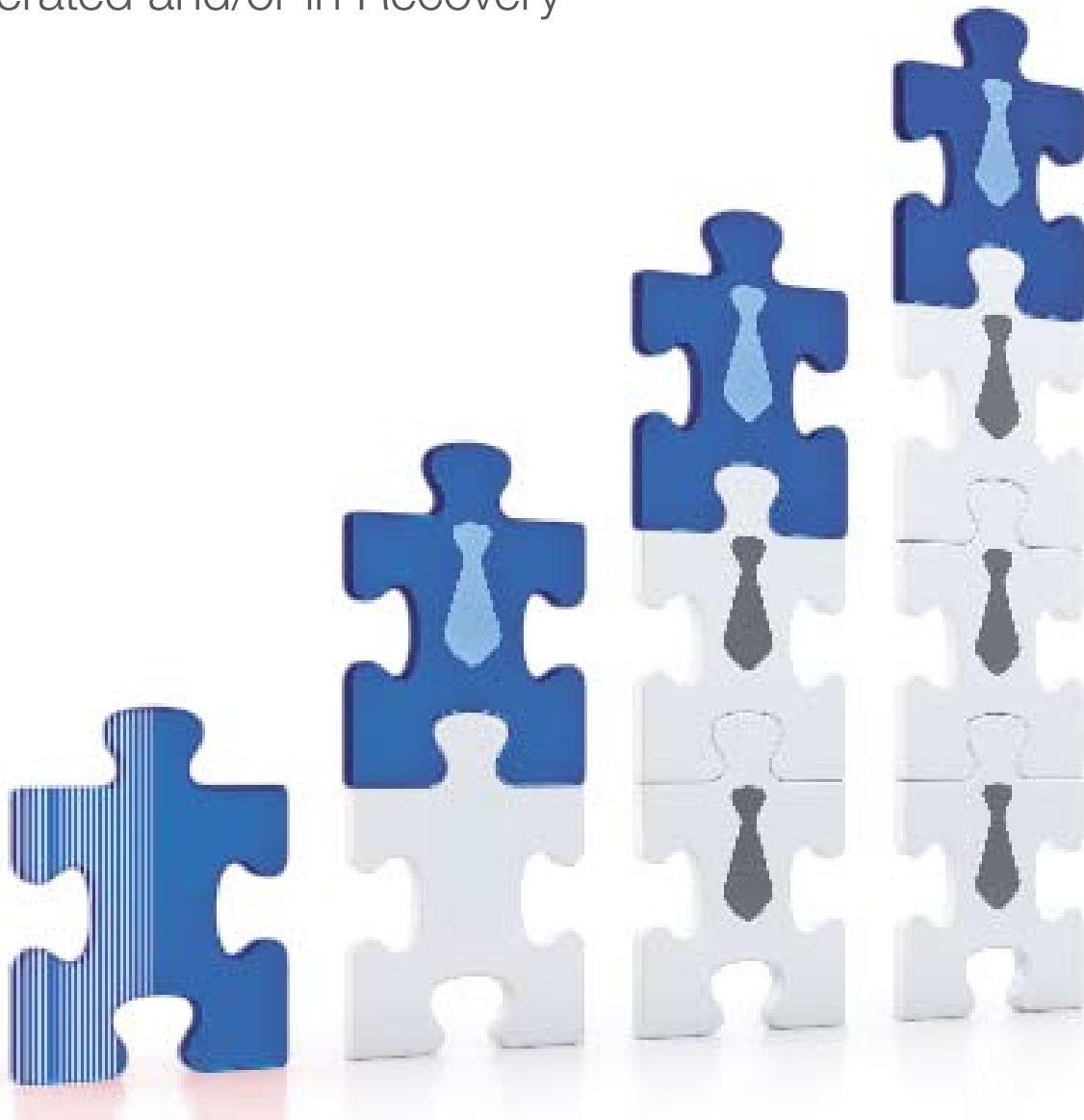


# EMPLOYING YOUR MISSION

Building Cultural Competence in Reentry Service Agencies  
Through the Hiring of Individuals Who Are Formerly  
Incarcerated and/or in Recovery



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## SUMMARY

This toolkit addresses several interrelated issues regarding the successful reentry into society of formerly incarcerated men and women. First, there is a reentry crisis of unparalleled proportion currently facing communities in the United States. Because incarceration both profoundly impacts those who experience it and disproportionately affects low-income people of color, the response to it needs to be culturally competent across a spectrum of issues. Second, there is an important employment component to individuals’ reentry experience. While stable employment is critical to the successful reintegration into society of those returning home, the formerly incarcerated nonetheless confront significant barriers to employment, including discrimination based on their conviction records. Finally –and this is the core of this toolkit– one way to address both of these issues is to build “cultural competence” within reentry services by hiring formerly incarcerated men and women to reflect the experiences and realities of the reentry population and provide services more effectively.

Section I of this toolkit reviews the relevant research literature. For contextual background, we will briefly discuss the reentry crisis, employment barriers that the formerly incarcerated face, and the current state of the law on measures to protect them from job discrimination. Next, we will explore the meaning of “cultural competence.”<sup>1</sup> That will be followed by a review of a diverse body of literature relevant to the central issue of this toolkit - the unique benefits and challenges afforded to reentry agencies when they hire people with histories of incarceration and other life experiences shared by the reentry population.

In Section II, this toolkit presents a case study of the New York City-based reentry agency, The Fortune Society, and its experience as a racially and ethnically diverse agency whose management and staff often share the life experiences and histories of its clients. At Fortune, 80% of its employees are people of color and 70% have histories of incarceration, substance abuse and/or homelessness.

Section III provides a brief case study of Thames Reach, a London-based services provider for the homeless, which came away from a 2003 visit to The Fortune Society with the conviction that it needed to embrace Fortune’s practice of hiring services users, both to increase its effectiveness as an agency and because it was the right thing to do. We will review their positive experience adopting Fortune’s culturally competent hiring model.

Finally, in Section IV, this toolkit will offer some promising practices and lessons learned about how to develop a culturally competent workforce in a reentry agency. Recognizing there is no one-size-fits-all approach, Section IV will focus on principles that have general application and can be adapted to best serve the needs of each individual agency.

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1 As it is beyond the scope of this toolkit to provide a comprehensive primer on building cultural competence, we limit our discussion to arriving at a shared understanding of the term and identifying its benefits.

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# LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear Colleagues,

The Fortune Society and the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice are pleased to present this toolkit, *Employing Your Mission: Building Cultural Competence in Reentry Service Agencies Through the Hiring of Individuals who are Formerly Incarcerated and/or In Recovery*. It has been developed for organizations that provide services to men and women with histories of incarceration and other related life experiences of the reentry population. The unprecedented number of men and women returning home from correctional facilities represents important challenges to community-based service providers. Adopting culturally competent hiring practices helps to address these challenges by providing job opportunities and skill development to formerly incarcerated men and women and enhancing service delivery capabilities by hiring staff with experiential knowledge. This toolkit shares promising practices for building cultural competence through hiring and developing individuals with life histories similar to the reentry client population.

In Fall 2009, The Fortune Society and Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, partnered to create materials to provide skill development opportunities for the reentry field. This toolkit highlights the experience of The Fortune Society, a racially and ethnically diverse agency whose management and staff largely share the life experiences and histories of its clients. It is set in a diverse body of academic literature addressing the relationship between reentry and employment and the unique benefits and challenges afforded to reentry agencies when they hire people with histories of incarceration and/or substance use. This collaboration between complementary sets of expertise in reentry – that of a direct service provider and a college of criminal justice – was further enriched by contributions from the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, Columbia University.

This toolkit focuses on helping organizations develop culturally competent hiring practices. It begins with an overview of the literature documenting the reentry crisis, employment barriers the formerly incarcerated face, and the current state of the law on measures to protect them from job discrimination. The toolkit then provides a detailed summary of relevant scholarly work on culturally competent hiring practices and the impact they have on the organization, its staff, and its clients. Following the review of relevant literature, the toolkit details The Fortune Society's experience of being a racially and ethnically diverse agency whose management and staff largely share the life experiences and histories of its clients. Readers will learn about Fortune's hiring philosophy and the strategies employed to identify, nurture, and develop employees who closely mirror the life experiences, challenges, and limited work histories of their clients. The toolkit culminates with key lessons and steps to help other organizations as they work to establish or sustain culturally competent hiring practices or begin to consider adopting this strategy.

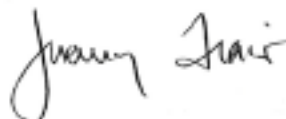
Implementing culturally competent hiring practices at a reentry organization yields numerous benefits; however, it is not without its challenges. As you will see, The Fortune Society's hiring practice and strategies have evolved – and continue to evolve – over the course of more than 40 years. A great deal of care, patience, and dedication has gone into creating staff development strategies. However, this work has paid off tremendously for Fortune, its staff, and its clients. The Fortune Society has received numerous awards for its culturally competent service provision, including recognition from the National Institute of Justice and the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

We hope the information presented in this toolkit, including The Fortune Society's case study, will provide guidance and encouragement to organizations that are considering culturally competent hiring practices as well as those looking to further develop their existing practice in doing so. We welcome you to contact The Fortune Society for more information.

Sincerely,



JoAnne Page  
President and CEO  
The Fortune Society



Jeremy Travis  
President  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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# Section I: Research Literature Review

## Background—The Reentry Crisis

Each year approximately 735,000 persons are being released from prisons (West, Sabol & Cooper 2010) and nearly nine million more from jails (Beck 2006), an unprecedented number of people returning home. For most, the reentry process—that is, the process by which formerly incarcerated individuals transition back into and are included within their communities and become productive, law-abiding members of society (Maruna & LeBel 2003, Braithwaite & Braithwaite 2001)—is fraught with difficulties. In disproportionate numbers, the formerly incarcerated are poor and nonwhite, have physical and/or mental disabilities, have substance abuse problems, are undereducated, lack vocational skills or job experience, and/or have unstable housing; and for many, these problems co-occur (Black & Cho 2004, Petersilia 2003, Report of the Reentry Policy Council 2003).

Moreover, the formerly incarcerated return home to communities marked by poverty, high unemployment and crime, and an inadequate number of effective comprehensive reentry programs to address their complex needs (Petersilia 2003, Report of the Reentry Policy Council 2003). The recidivism rates are high. According to one oft-cited national study, approximately two out of every three persons released are re-arrested within three years, and slightly more than half are re-incarcerated (Langan & Levin 2002). The public safety and fiscal costs are grave, as is the tragedy of so many lives in crisis.

## Importance of and Barriers to Employment

In the “what works” literature of reentry, meaningful employment is consistently demonstrated to be one of the strongest pathways to desistance from crime and successful reentry (Petersilia 2003; Visher & Travis 2003; Uggen 2000). Employment allows formerly incarcerated persons to take care of themselves and their families, develop valuable life skills, and strengthen self-esteem and social connectedness (Petersilia 2003). Unfortunately, the reentry population faces significant personal and structural barriers to employment. On top of the above-described challenges (e.g., widespread lack of job skills and experience and reentry into communities with weak connections to stable employment opportunities (Petersilia 2003)), the formerly incarcerated confront two serious types of employment discrimination: *de jure*, or legally sanctioned discrimination, and *de facto*, or impermissible discrimination that nonetheless exists.

As to *de jure* discrimination, a myriad of state laws exist that ban the licensing and/or hiring of the previously incarcerated in specific services-related areas of employment such as child care, health care, barbers and beauticians, education, security and/or real estate (Petersilia 2003; Legal Action Center 2004, updated 2009). Many states also have laws that deny public employment to the formerly incarcerated, while others impose a “*direct*

*relationship test*” allowing government agencies to argue that the criminal conviction has a bearing on the job in question (Petersilia 2003, Legal Action Center 2004, updated 2009).

In addition, there is a great deal of *de facto* discrimination against persons with arrest and criminal conviction histories, and, given the disproportionate number of the formerly incarcerated who are persons of color, this discrimination is exacerbated by racial and ethnic discrimination. Survey results show that employers are much more reluctant to hire the formerly incarcerated than *any* other group of disadvantaged workers and view them as lacking reliability and trustworthiness (Holzer, Raphael & Stoll 2002, Holzer 1996). In a 2005 study of black, Latino and white male job-seekers, researchers Pager and Western (2005) found a statistically significant degree of discrimination against those with criminal conviction records, despite having controlled for education, experience, age and appearance. Moreover, the discrimination against black and Latino men with criminal conviction records was worse than that against whites with similar records, and it was worse for blacks than Latinos.

## Antidiscrimination Measures

No federal law expressly prohibits job discrimination against people with arrest or criminal conviction histories. However, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits job discrimination on the basis of race, color, gender, national origin or religion, does provide some protection under its “*disparate impact*” analysis. The “*disparate impact*” analysis, a product of judicial interpretation, prohibits employment practices that while on their face do not appear to target a racial or other protected group, in operation exclude a disproportionate percentage of racial or ethnic minorities or members of another protected group. In one landmark decision<sup>1</sup>, a federal appeals court held that an employment policy that excluded all applicants with criminal convictions, other than traffic offenses, violated Title VII because it had a disparate impact on African Americans (who, given their disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, were excluded at 2.5 times the rate at which white applicants were) and that impact was not justified by any business necessity.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), charged with enforcing Title VII, has issued guidelines to ward against employment policies that could have a disparate impact on a statutorily protected group. Given the disproportionate number of people of color affected by the criminal justice system, the EEOC guidelines recommend that with respect to job applicants with criminal conviction records, employers make individualized decisions and assess whether or not a business-related rationale exists to reject the applicant based on the following three factors: 1) the nature and gravity of the

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1 *Green v. Missouri Pacific Railroad Company*, 523 F.2d 1290 (8th Cir. 1975).

offense; 2) the time that has elapsed since the conviction and/or completion of sentence; and 3) the nature of the job held or sought (EEOC Compliance Manual 2006).

While Title VII is binding on employers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, historically, the law's enforcement has had little bite. It has been difficult to mount disparate impact challenges, as evidentiary proof of a disparate impact is hard to come by and courts generally give deference to the job-related or public safety rationales that employers invoke (Simonson 2006). Recently, however, the EEOC, as part of the E-Race initiative (Eradicating Racism and Colorism From Employment), is reemphasizing that blanket exclusions of people with criminal conviction histories may be unlawful under Title VII's disparate impact analysis<sup>2</sup>. The EEOC is currently focusing on employers' routine use of criminal background checks<sup>3</sup>, as are some state and local governments.<sup>4</sup>

At the state level, few states have express antidiscrimination protections. According to a state-by-state analysis conducted by the Legal Action Center (2004, updated 2009), 34 states have no standards to regulate the use of criminal conviction records in hiring decisions made by *public employers*. In 42 states and the District of Columbia, there are no standards to regulate such use by *private employers*.<sup>5</sup> As of 2009, only eight states have enacted laws protecting the formerly incarcerated from job discrimination by private employers - Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, Massachusetts (for certain misdemeanors), Montana, Pennsylvania, New York and Wisconsin. Most of these laws require that a decision to deny a job due to a criminal conviction record be based on a business necessity or public safety concern.

New York's Article 23A Law, considered to be the most progressive of these laws (Simonson 2006, O'Brien & Darrow 2008), merits brief examination as a thoughtful and balanced way to evaluate a person's background in the context of the job applied for. Article 23A forbids a blanket ban against hiring individuals with criminal conviction records and requires that employers engage in an individualized and contextual evaluation based on the following eight factors:

- » The public policy of the state to encourage the employment of formerly incarcerated people;
- » The specific duties of the job or license;
- » The bearing, if any, that the criminal conviction has on the fitness or ability of the applicant to perform one or more duties;
- » The time that has elapsed since the offense or completion of sentence;
- » The age of the person at the time of the offense;
- » The seriousness of the crime;
- » The information produced by the applicant, or on his/her behalf, regarding rehabilitation and good conduct, including a certificate of good conduct or relief from civil disabilities; and
- » Any legitimate interest of the employer in protecting property or safety and welfare of specific individuals or the general public (NY Corrections Law §753-755).

### Increased Push for Culturally Competent Reentry Agencies

With minority Americans expected to reach 47% of the population by 2050 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996), blacks and Latinos currently comprising a disproportionate two thirds of the prison population, and disparities existing in access to effective services, it is important for human services and reentry agencies to provide services in a culturally competent manner (Brach & Fraser 2000, Primm, Osher & Gomez 2005). Federal agencies that fund reentry programs, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), and Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), expressly make evidence of cultural competence a criterion for eligibility to receive program grants.<sup>6</sup>

The definition of cultural competence commonly accepted within the human services fields and the federal agencies that support reentry efforts derives from the work of Cross et al., who defined it as "*a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations*" (Cross et al. 1989:28; see also DHHS Goal 6 Workgroup 1998). The word "*culture*"—defined as "*the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes the thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group*" (Cross et al. 1989:28)—is used to communicate that culture matters when delivering services. It matters as to "*whether people even seek help...what types of help they seek, what coping styles and social supports they have, and how much stigma they attach to [their conditions]*" (DHHS OSG 2001). The word "*competence*" is used to signal a capacity to function effectively: the point of being able to

2 See <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/initiatives/e-race/goals.cfm> (retrieved on November 15, 2010).

3 See *EEOC v. Freeman Cos.*, No. 09-CV-02573 (D. Md.).

4 A new development at the state and local level, labeled the "*ban the box*" movement, is the enactment of laws to prohibit employers from requesting criminal conviction information on job application forms or running background checks before interviewing qualified applicants. A total of six states (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New Mexico) and about two dozen cities and/or counties have enacted such laws. See generally, the National Employment Law Project website: [http://www.nelp.org/index.php/content/content\\_issues/category/criminal\\_records\\_and\\_employment/](http://www.nelp.org/index.php/content/content_issues/category/criminal_records_and_employment/) (retrieved on November 20, 2010).

5 37 states and the District of Columbia do not have laws to prohibit employers from asking about and using evidence of *arrests* in making job decisions, even though an arrest is not proof of criminal conduct. In 10 states all employers are prohibited from considering arrests, and in three states, only *some* employers are prohibited from considering arrests

6 See, e.g., DHHS SAMHSA Request for Applications (RFA) No.: SP-10-003; DHHS SAMHSA RFA No.: TI-10-007; DHHS SAMHSA and CSAT RFA No.: TI-10-006; and DHHS SAMHSA RFA No.: TI-10-012.





incorporate multiple behaviors, skills, life experiences, and cultural knowledge is to work effectively in diverse settings to produce better outcomes for clients (Primm, Osher & Gomez 2005, Brach & Fraser 2000, HSRA 2001, SAMHSA TIP No. 46).

Cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period of time and has multiple stages (Cross et al. 1989, Brach & Fraser 2000). According to Cross et al. (1989), the following five elements are essential to an agency developing cultural competence:

- » Valuing diversity, and the diversity within diversity;
- » Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment (i.e., recognition of your own culture before you learn about your clients’);
- » Being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact (e.g., mistrust based on history of discrimination or tension from differences in communication styles);
- » Acquiring institutionalized cultural knowledge about the community served; and
- » Developing adaptations to service delivery models that reflect an understanding of cultural diversity and the realities of the communities served.

These five elements should be manifested *system-wide* at every core function of an organization. This includes policymaking, goal setting, and the administration or

governance of the organization. Concerning the clients more directly, these five elements should be evident in the design, implementation, and evaluation of services; in the organization’s infrastructure, including resource allocation and the creation of a welcoming and accessible physical environment; in its communications, both within the agency and with clients and the community; and in the hiring and development of a culturally diverse workforce (Cross et al. 1989; DHHS HRSA 2002).

### Cultural Competence for Agencies Includes Hiring Those Who Share Clients’ Life Experiences

Increasingly, those who fund reentry programs expect an agency’s cultural competence practices to include hiring a diverse workforce that reflects the client population. One aspect of SAMHSA’s guidelines for assessing an agency’s cultural competence is “*staffing the initiative with people who are familiar with or who are themselves members of the population/community.*”<sup>7</sup> With respect to hiring counselors to service the formerly incarcerated, SAMHSA Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) No. 44 (2005) recommends that reentry agencies train and hire people in recovery, including from within the client population, because the “*credibility*” that such staff would have with the clients and their ability

7 SAMHSA Guidelines for Assessing Cultural Competence (2010), retrieved on October 30, 2010, from: [http://www.samhsa.gov/Grants/guide\\_culture.aspx](http://www.samhsa.gov/Grants/guide_culture.aspx).

to be inspiring role models “*can’t be underestimated.*” SAMHSA TIP No. 44 asserts that the formerly incarcerated need staff who can build their self-esteem and give them hope, lack “*negative counselor attitudes*” (that is, a belief in the poor prognosis of clients or a reluctance to work with them), will not be easily manipulated, and understand that relapses will happen from time to time. Based on these client needs, special attention should be paid to hiring peers as counselors (2005).

## Research on Positive Impact of Cultural Competence Practices and Hiring

Empirical studies exist, albeit still limited in scope, that show a positive relationship between hiring practices (and other strategies that support cultural competence) and improved client/patient outcomes.

Researchers Brach and Frazer (2000), for example, found the following benefits of recruiting and retaining culturally diverse staff:

- » Communications, rapport, trust, adherence to treatments, and client/patient satisfaction and outcomes were improved when the clients/patients were served by professionals of the same racial/ethnic background (see also Tarn et al. 2005);
- » The presence of a diverse staff increased the user friendliness experienced by the community served, thus impacting access to care; and
- » There was less discrimination—based on control group studies—against minority clients/patients on the part of minority staff.

As relevant to reentry clients with HIV/AIDS, an assessment of publicly funded HIV/AIDS programs in Massachusetts reported numerous benefits achieved from hiring peer employees with HIV/AIDS, including:

- » Better outreach to clients and improved access to services;
- » Improved client knowledge and adherence to treatment and services;
- » Improved agency/client relationship and agency image;
- » Increased agency responsiveness to clients’ needs; and
- » Stronger service and case management teams (Rajabiun, Abridge & Tobias 2006).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the cultural competence literature, research from the fields of criminology, psychology,

8 An exhaustive review of empirical studies, regarding such other cultural competence strategies as cultural competence training and racial/ethnic concordance in service models, correlated positively with improvements in provider knowledge, and for the clients, with increases in intake, program completion, and knowledge and satisfaction (Fortier & Bishop 2004). With respect to the impact of a cultural competence training model that familiarizes mental health counselors with “*incarceration culture*” or the “*inmate code,*” researchers found a reduced reluctance on the part of the counselors to service people with histories of mental health problems and incarceration, greater client trust in staff and involvement in treatment, and a reduced number of incidents of disruption by clients (Rotter et al. 2006).

sociology, and the self-help movement also supports the proposition that the hiring of people with histories of incarceration—and substance abuse and/or mental illness—is an effective practice for agencies that provide services to the reentry population. We include research on hiring persons with histories of substance abuse and mental illness for two reasons. First, the problems of substance abuse and mental illness disproportionately impact the reentry population. Indeed, three out of every four persons released from prison have a substance abuse problem (Report of the Reentry Policy Council 2003). Accordingly, literature on the benefits to hiring people with those histories is highly relevant to reentry agencies. Second, for both the formerly incarcerated and those with histories of substance abuse, as we shall discuss below, the process by which they exit from their deviant pasts and adopt new identities and orientations toward helping others with the same problems appears to be remarkably similar. This transformation process contributes significantly to making these individuals credible and powerful role models and valuable employees.

## The Theoretical Framework: The Benefits of Employing the “*Professional Ex-*”

Engaging individuals further along in their own recoveries to help others with the same or similar difficulties is an enduring approach that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) adopted in 1935, spurring a widespread movement of other 12-step and mutual-help organizations dedicated to serving people with addictions, illnesses, and behavioral problems (Riessman 1965; 1990; Gartner & Riessman 1984). Influenced by the AA model, agencies and treatment centers began to actively employ people further along in their recoveries to provide services to clients. This development, labeled the “*professional ex-*” movement by some, especially those in the substance abuse field (Brown 1991a; Brown 1991b), and the “*helper therapy principle*” by others (Riessman 1965), impacted the reentry field as well.

Criminologist Donald Cressey (1955; 1965) theorized that the most effective mechanism for rehabilitating those being released from prison would be to employ formerly incarcerated persons further along in their reentry process to lead service agencies expressly formed to support reintegration. The implicit assumption is that those who are further along in the reentry process and have adopted prosocial values—i.e., adherence to communal norms (Clark & Jordan 2002; De Groot & Steg 2009)—can serve as both “*agents of change*” (e.g., role model and mentor) for others and “*targets of change*” for themselves. The relationship is mutually beneficial in that through service to others, the mentors’ prosocial orientations would be reinforced, and their knowledge about crime and incarceration would facilitate rapport with clients (Cressey 1955; 1965).

Criminologist Herbert Sigurdson (1969) echoed Cressey’s work. Sigurdson argues that the services needed (e.g., job training and placement, counseling, mentoring, arranging services) do not require advanced degrees, and the formerly incarcerated could be trained to provide those services because they have “*excellent credentials*” from

having lived through the similar experiences. In this context, “*knowledge [serves] as a resource rather than a liability*” (p.427). Finally, these professional roles for the formerly incarcerated reinforce prosocial values and make them positive role models for clients and the community at large.

Two decades later, sociologist Helen Ebaugh (1988) augmented Sigurdson’s work by disentangling the process through which people “*exit*” from a role that is central to their identity and establish a new “*master role.*” According to Ebaugh there are four stages of role exit:

- » The individual begins to doubt his or her commitment to the central role (e.g., being an alcoholic, a criminal, a nun, a prostitute).
- » The individual seeks out alternatives to the role, imagines a new life, engages in role-playing, and forms new social ties consistent with the emerging new identity.
- » The individual reduces the cognitive conflict between the new and old self-images and mobilizes the resources necessary—emotional, social and/or economic—to adopt the new one.
- » The individual deals with the residuals of his past role, as in deciding how to present himself to the world.

Role exit typically involves a radical transformation of identity and adoption of a new “*master role*” that becomes the priority in a person’s life. The former role, however, is never quite abandoned, and lingering aspects carry over into the new identity. For those with a prior deviant identity, this lingering can facilitate, rather than inhibit, the role exit (Brown 1991a). For example, in the case of persons exiting from histories of substance abuse and adopting new prosocial master roles as substance abuse counselors, their experiences with addiction and recovery “*provide their experiential and professional legitimacy among patients, the community, and other professionals....*” (Brown 1991a: 226, emphasis in original). The “*experiential knowledge*”—the information and insights from personal experience living with and recovering from a disease—forms “*the basis of authority*” for a new identity as a helper to others with the same problems (Borkman et al. 1997).

The process that Ebaugh and Brown describe also applies to the formerly incarcerated. Studies of formerly incarcerated men and women who desist from crime reveal that they undergo “*cognitive shifts*” that then facilitate their taking advantage of elements in their environments as “*hooks for change*” toward adopting new prosocial self-images (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002; see also, LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway 2008). The most salient cognitive shifts are: an openness to and desire for change; having hope and future goals; accepting responsibility for their part in their pasts; an ability to envision a replacement prosocial self to supplant the marginal one to be left behind; and loss of meaning and relevance of the old identity as a deviant person (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph 2002, LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway 2008). Another role-

exit change for many who successfully desist from crime is the development of desires to give back to others (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway 2008, Maruna 2001).

This change process in the formerly incarcerated is intrinsically a social transformation. That is, the new identity is the result of a dynamic interplay between the cognitive shifts identified above and social interactions that involve adhering to norms and/or prosocial behaviors (e.g., participating in a 12-step group, being open to mentoring by another, or the parenting of children) (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph 2002). This dynamic interplay also occurs in reentry programs staffed by formerly incarcerated counselors. In giving feedback to clients about their recovery/reentry progress, the peer counselors help clients internalize new conceptions of themselves as “*success stories*” and inspire them to participate in prosocial behaviors, such as running a group meeting or being supportive to newer clients (Maruna et al. 2004).

The above research suggests that when identifying potential candidates for reentry work, it is crucial to look for evidence of openness to change, hope and future goals, acceptance of one’s part in one’s past, a new self-conception as a prosocial person, and social involvement in some activity that constitutes a “*gateway to conforming others*” or “*forays into more prosocial territory*” (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph 2002: 1055–1056). However, are the benefits of hiring people with histories of incarceration worth the effort involved in carefully screening candidates for evidence of these cognitive shifts and emergent self-image? Research suggests these efforts are strongly beneficial. We summarize these findings next.

### Benefits to *Clients* of Hiring People with Shared Life Experiences

Regardless of the program setting, a strong bond forms between clients and staff with shared life experiences (or between clients and peer-clients further along in their respective recoveries/reentry) and acts as a significant catalyst for change in the clients (Hutchinson 2006; Soward, O’Boyle & Weissman 2006; Richie 2001; Boschee & Jones 2000; Davidson et al., 1999; Brown 1991b).<sup>9</sup> Richie’s (2001) study on the reentry needs of formerly incarcerated women, for example, concluded that a critical factor in successful reentry was having similarly situated staff members who could serve as powerful and credible role models that the clients *could identify and bond with, learn from, and be inspired by*. This effect was particularly strong if the staff members came from the same neighborhoods as the clients.

Clients derive multiple benefits from having credible role models and mentors with deep experiential knowledge

<sup>9</sup> As noted before, we include the related research on the benefits of hiring people with histories of substance abuse and mental illness (and the research on related 12-step programs) because of the significant overlaps between these groups and the reentry populations, and because the personal changes that occur and insights gained from their process of recovery/reentry are so remarkably similar.



of client problems and the recovery/reentry process, including the following:

- » A peer's sharing with a client of his own life experiences and insights gained *increases the client's understanding* of her own situation and *reduces the sense of isolation* or of being different or defective (Davidson et al. 1999; Cain 1991; Rajabiun, Abridge & Tobias 2006);
- » Seeing that others like them have made it and hearing from them how it can be done *inspires hope and instills courage in clients to take steps* toward recovery/reintegration (Rajabiun, Abridge & Tobias 2006, Schiff & Bargal 2000, Roberts et al. 1999, Davidson et al. 1999);
- » The peers' experiential knowledge allows for *vicarious learning on the part of the clients and enhances their coping and problem-solving skills* (Rajabiun, Abridge & Tobias 2006, DeLeon 2000, Davidson et al. 1999, Borkman et al. 1988, Cain 1991); and
- » The experiential knowledge and insights gained about the recovery/reentry process forms the *foundation for the peer employees' way of interacting with clients*. It is the source of their *empathy and understanding –including the knowledge that recovery/reentry is a process, not an event– their non-judgment, their patience yet persistence, and their ability to identify client strengths, progress made, vulnerabilities, and the excuses and rationalizations* some clients may use (Richie 2001, White 2000, Boschee & Jones 2000, DeLeon 2000, Davidson et al. 1999, Borkman et al. 1998).

For one self-help organization whose population struggles with mental illness, the closer that the participants felt to the peer members in their groups and the more integrated they felt, the higher the positive adjustment outcomes (Roberts et al. 1999; see also Maton 1988 with respect to other self-help groups).

### Benefits to the Peer Employees from Helping Others

In taking on new roles of responsibility to help similarly situated others, the peer employee (or peer-client mentor) is helped in that:

- » There is something unique about helping someone recover from a problem one has shared that provides a particularly strong *boost to self-esteem and sense of purpose, value, and efficacy* (Toch 2000, Roberts et al. 1999, Riessman 1965, 1990);
- » The cognitive mechanisms associated with learning through teaching and mentoring others means that there is continued *self-improvement, self-compliance with one's own recovery and cementing of the new prosocial identity* (Bazemore & Karp 2004, Maruna & LeBel 2003, Maruna 2001, Toch 2000, Roberts et al. 1999, Humphreys 2004, Cain 1991);
- » For the formerly incarcerated person, guiding

others to a successful recovery/reentry also contributes in a unique way to *self-forgiveness and a sense of having earned redemption* by compensating, at least partly, for the harm done to society or to specific individuals through now "doing good" for others (Toch 2000, Bazemore and Karp 2004, Maruna & LeBel 2003);

- » As a result of formerly incarcerated people supporting the recovery/reentry process of others, the community may change its attitudes about formerly incarcerated people, thereby *easing their reintegration into the moral community at large* (Bazemore & Karp 2004, Maruna & LeBel 2003); and
- » For the formerly incarcerated, being meaningfully employed makes further involvement in crime less likely. One reason is the informal social control that accepting responsibility in any meaningful work (or relationship) has on a person (Uggen and Janikula 1999; Toch 2000; Sampson and Laub 1993). Another factor has to do with what Erik Erikson called "generativity," which, as defined by Maruna (2001), means the concern and commitment to promoting the next generation through teaching or mentoring them and generating outcomes that aim to benefit them (Maruna 2001; see also Bazemore & Karp 2004). Concern for the next generation contributes to desistance from crime.

### Benefits to Agencies

Agencies simultaneously benefit when the outcomes for the clients (or in the case of self-help groups, the participants) are positive in that:

- » Peer employees can deliver services *as effectively* as professionally trained employees (Davidson et al. 1999, Hutchinson et al. 2006, Christensen & Jacobson 1994).
- » At times, nonprofessionally trained peer employees can be *more effective* (Christensen & Jacobson 1994). Borkman et al.'s (1998) study of consumer operated Social Model Programs (SMPs) in California, a community model for delivering substance abuse treatment by those recovering from substance abuse, found that the SMPs offered treatment outcomes as effective as those at private and significantly more expensive treatment centers. With respect to achieving reductions in criminal activities of the clients, the consumer-operated SMPs, however, were more effective.
- » Peer employees are very *committed and passionate*, due in large part to their gratitude for their own recoveries (White 2001, Brown 1991a, 1991b).
- » Hiring peer employees at varied levels of skill and salaries can provide a cost-effective means of service delivery (Hutchinson et al. 2006, Borkman et al. 1998). Given that the demand for reentry, mental health and substance abuse treatment services exceeds the supply of workers in this

field, researchers have concluded that hiring peer workers is an effective way to expand needed services and do so in environs unencumbered by stigma or discrimination (Hutchinson et al. 2006, Goldstrum et al. 2006, Davidson et al. 1999, Borkman et al. 1998).

### Some Challenges to Hiring Peer Employees

Hiring people with life histories shared by your client population can present challenges, albeit manageable. Some involve correcting misconceptions, while others will require creating supportive work environments. One challenge is responding to the misconception that people with difficult pasts do not change (Davidson et al. 1999). The research discussed above regarding role exit (Ebaugh 1988) and the cognitive/social transformations that occur in people with deviant pasts (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway 2008, Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph 2002, Maruna 2001) proves that change is possible and that persons with troubled pasts can become effective service providers. Moreover, some common sense criteria can be identified and applied to screen candidates, as we shall discuss in the following sections of this toolkit.<sup>10</sup>

Another challenge is the concern that experiential knowledge, as the basis of authority for acquiring a job, will translate into substandard performance or require an inordinate amount of on-the-job supports and training (Davidson et al. 1999, Borkman et al. 1998). The flip side to this concern is the underlying misconception that only highly trained professionals can ameliorate certain problems (Davidson et al. 1999). The research discussed above demonstrates that professionals with “experiential knowledge” are effective workers (e.g., Hutchinson et al. 2006, Davidson et al. 1999, Borkman et al. 1998). However, some will require supplemental on-the-job supports such as in-house training, outside workshops, and supportive supervision, all of which is similar in concept and philosophy to the “supported employment” provided to employees with disabilities (Borkman et al. 1998, Davidson et al. 1999). Using vocational training concepts, agencies have succeeded in effectively training and retaining peer employees (Hutchinson et al. 2006). We shall discuss training, support, and supervision strategies in the remaining sections of this toolkit.

Other challenges include the risks of relapse, burnout from stress, and that the passion and commitment people with histories of incarceration and/or substance abuse have to help similarly situated others may lead to over-commitment and over-identification with clients (White 2000). White recommends that service providers who share clients’ life experiences counter these risks with self-

reflection and self-repair tactics and process the stresses of work with others in the workplace.

On balance, the research literature concludes that the costs and challenges that exist are strongly outweighed by the benefits. This has been the experience of The Fortune Society, as we shall now examine.



## Section II. Case Study—How The Fortune Society Builds Cultural Competence Through Its Hiring and Management Practices

### Introduction

From its beginnings in 1967, The Fortune Society has been informed and shaped by people whose life experiences of incarceration and substance abuse mirrored those of the clients served. For Fortune, the benefits of a culturally competent workforce—greater effectiveness in service model design and delivery and advocacy efforts—more than outweigh the costs and challenges involved in hiring, developing and retaining people with limited work experience and histories shared by the client population. Indeed, the principle cost, the effort involved in developing and implementing a carefully nuanced hiring practice and appropriate on-the-job supports for such employees, redounds to the benefit of the entire agency and makes it stronger. In addition, Fortune’s hiring policies are in conformance with New York’s antidiscrimination law (see Section I above). Fortune’s CEO JoAnne Page, who has been at the helm since 1987, emphasizes that even those convicted of serious crimes can transform themselves and become valuable employees, saying:

*I think it’s important to be explicit in acknowledging that some of our strongest staff and managers have served many years in prison for some very serious crimes, including violent felonies. We don’t screen*

<sup>10</sup> By way of example, the California SMP substance abuse treatment centers use the following criteria when hiring applicants with histories of substance abuse: minimum requirement of sobriety of from one to two years; active participation in a recovery program; volunteer or other experience working in a recovery program; ability to focus on others and avoid rigid thinking; openness to training; and, for managers, planning and budgeting skills (Borkman et al. 1988).

*these people out based on their pasts. If they have been able to move beyond their pasts and gain valuable insights, then they have a lot to offer our clients.*

A key contribution of Fortune's story is learning how Fortune *identifies, nurtures, and develops* those employees they call their "*Diamonds in the Rough*"— men and women who closely mirror the life experiences, challenges, and limited work histories of their clients. They are "diamonds" because they have acquired special talents and insights from having done the hard work of achieving stability and personal growth in their own process of recovery and/or reentry.

## **A. FORTUNE'S ORIGINS: AN AGENCY OF AND FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSONS**

In 1967, David Rothenberg, a theatrical press agent, produced the play "Fortune and Men's Eyes," about one man's experience in prison. During its run, Rothenberg welcomed formerly incarcerated persons to join him on stage to speak with the audience about the challenges of reentry. A few months later, he and two formerly incarcerated men, Kenny Jackson and Melvin Rivers, decided to form a nonprofit agency to provide reentry assistance to people being released from prison, and they called it The Fortune Society. From the start, Fortune was designed and staffed so that the life experience of formerly incarcerated people would shape the agency. Co-founders Jackson and Rivers, one a former gang leader and the other a former alcoholic, became Fortune's first counselors and, in collaboration with the first clients and board of directors, identified the needs that Fortune would address. Since that time, Fortune's mission and services have evolved organically, and persons with experiential knowledge about incarceration, substance abuse, and, in later days, HIV/AIDS and homelessness, have always shaped that process.

Fortune's commitment to having a board, management, and staff whose life experiences mirror those of its clients has never impeded its growth and success as a reentry service provider and advocate. Fortune has evolved from a staff of three operating on a shoestring budget to being an agency with a \$16 million dollar budget and staff of 190. Today, Fortune operates a supportive housing facility for homeless formerly incarcerated men and women in West Harlem (Fortune Academy), a mixed-use affordable housing project in West Harlem (Castle Gardens), and a large facility in Long Island City that offers programs in alternatives to incarceration, substance abuse treatment, vocational and educational training, employment services and coaching, life skills, parenting/family reunification, anger management, and HIV/AIDS, and other health-related supportive services. Fortune also conducts research and actively advocates in the public arena for changes in laws and policies that hinder the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated men and women. Fortune is currently working on becoming a

licensed provider of mental health services. In the course of its growth, Fortune has won multiple awards and recognitions.<sup>11</sup>

## **B. BENEFITS TO BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH HIRING PEOPLE WITH LIFE EXPERIENCE**

Approximately 70% of Fortune's employees have histories of incarceration, substance abuse and/or homelessness (with nearly 50% having been formerly incarcerated), and over 80% are persons of color. People with these life experiences occupy all levels of the agency, increasing its cultural competence and offering the advantage of greater competitiveness in eligibility for funding. At the management and executive level, the presence of key individuals with such life experience shapes program design and advocacy efforts, and holds the agency's direction true to its mission. At the line staff level, the benefit shows up in the skill and perceptiveness with which clients are served.

Fortune believes that there are two principle and interrelated dynamics at work through which employees with these life experiences impact, in a positive manner, the agency's core functions of program design and delivery and advocacy. They are the experiential knowledge and insights these employees have gained from their life experience and recovery and/or reentry process and their ability to be powerful and credible role model, providing clients with hope and inspiring them to do the hard work of recovery/reentry. One senior Fortune employee, a former client with a history of incarceration and substance abuse, explained these two dynamics in the following way:

*Fortune's hiring practice is a policy driven by the concept of peer education. First, who better to understand the plight of someone trying to reenter society than one who came home earlier than they did? We may have a social worker or psychologist or psychiatrist instruct us on how to transform and go back into society, but that's not tangible the way it is to hear it from someone who left the footprints in the sand and says, 'I made it, so can you. You just have to follow them.' That is something you can touch and taste and feel. Second, it is about silent role modeling. Lots of people who know me knew me before. They see my life transformed and it gives them hope that they can change. They see a roadmap to becoming a productive member of society. So it makes it tangible."*

### **Value of Experiential Knowledge**

Employees' experiential knowledge enhances the agency's effectiveness in providing services and advocacy to the client population in the following ways:

- » Staff and managers know the complete dimensions - social, physiological, emotional, and cognitive - of

<sup>11</sup> See <http://fortunesociety.org/learn-more/what-is-fortune/awards-accolades/>. Retrieved on October 30, 2010.



*the conditions under which clients live, or have lived, and of the recovery/reentry processes and steps.*

They empathize with their clients, can assess their needs, understand the vulnerabilities that present themselves at all stages of the recovery and reentry process, and see signs of relapse before others would.

- » *Because they know the steps to recovery and reentry, these employees also see and acknowledge the progress that clients make, even before the clients themselves see any change. This is critical to building client self-esteem and fostering client engagement in services and/or treatment.*
- » *Because they developed crucial skills with which to survive life on the streets and incarceration, these employees have an enhanced ability to read people and are not easily manipulated.<sup>12</sup>*
- » *Employees who share the same social environments as clients have access to some very specific levels of helpful information (e.g., that the place where a client hangs out has a high level of drug activity).*
- » *Knowing what the clients are struggling with is instrumental in building client trust, which in turn contributes to client engagement in services and treatment programs.*

With respect to building trust, staff members know from their personal experiences (including as former Fortune clients) that clients, a fair number of whom are mandated to Fortune's programs by the courts, probation and/or parole, arrive hostile, hopeless, with "trust issues" or "their guard up." They may arrive "skeptical about service providers in general" based on prior experience with providers elsewhere who may have been overwhelmed, put them down, did not understand them, or failed to properly assess their needs. Fortune staff members also know that some of the survival lessons learned in prison (e.g., the need to protect your turf and act tough) can result in attitudes and behaviors that can lead to resistance to program services. Staff members are very understanding, therefore, around issues of respect, dignity, autonomy, shame, and racial/ethnic validation, knowing that sensitive handling of those issues helps create the necessary bridges to client trust, without which, said one senior employee, "They won't tell you things like 'I was tempted to use last night.' They won't come to you with their issues."

The clients and former clients interviewed spoke about the care and concern they feel (or felt) from their Fortune counselors and how important that was in developing trust. One client explained:

*They have a better understanding. They made me feel at ease. It's the way they talk to people.... When*

12 One senior employee called it the "third eye" that allows him to pick up all sorts of verbal, behavioral, emotional and attitudinal cues from clients that tell him when a client is in a vulnerable state, has "good intentions or not," or simply that the "moment is right to initiate talking to someone." This skill is also important to determining client "readiness" for a volunteer or employment position or treatment program.

*people haven't been where I've been, I tend to not really want to hear them. That's just me. How can you understand being homeless or being in prison if you've never been there.... When they explain their process and the steps they took to change their lives, that gives me confidence to open up to them.... They have genuine care and concern for our well-being.... They don't talk down to us, like they're up here and we're down there.... They have been there already in prison and been put down all their lives. They know what that feels like.... When you are dealing with addiction, it's very important that you can speak to someone who's been there.*



## Powerful and Credible Role Models

Employees who have successfully navigated the challenges of recovery and/or reentry provide the additional bonus of being credible and powerful role models that clients can identify with and want to emulate. The impact of this is all the more powerful when clients interact with Fortune employees whom they knew as "tough people" from the streets or prison, some of whom are now part of Fortune's management team. CEO Page explained that:

*You get a level of role modeling that you can't put a price on. Hope is big. You see someone on staff who was in more trouble than you ever wanted to be in and who is now a role model. It's powerful. It's a way in which you bring hope and provide a role model for a client that another person without that experience won't bring. This hope fuels people to do the hard things they need to do to change.<sup>13</sup>*

A key element of being a role model is the "great deal of sharing and advice being given from people who have faced very similar circumstances." This sharing, and the hope and

13 The employees are very keenly aware that they are looked up to. One senior employee with a known reputation on the streets said: *Lots of people who know me knew me before. They see my life transformed and it gives them hope that they can change. They see a roadmap to becoming a productive member of society.* Another employee, a senior director, acknowledged that: *"There is a high degree of credibility given to the formerly incarcerated people that work at the agency, especially those who are in management. People relate to us. We know that we are huge role models for clients and staff."*



courage it creates, resonates strongly with the clients, as the following client statement demonstrates:

*But it helps a lot, in general, to know that my case manager was out there using drugs like I was, and it benefits me to know that I can get there too. I can stay on the right path. I have a choice like he had a choice, and he's doing good and doing what he needs to do to maintain being a productive member of society. If he is doing the right things to stay on the right path, I can do it too. It helps a whole lot.*

## Organizational Integrity and Providing Pathways to Careers

Fortune's conspicuous and substantial hiring of people with histories of incarceration and other experiences shared by their clients is also driven by the need to be true to its mission and values as an organization, be a role model to other agencies and employers for what it preaches, and be authentic in its advocacy work. As explained by CEO Page, it would contradict Fortune's stated mission "to support the successful reentry of men and women released from prison" and its belief "in the power of individuals to change" were Fortune to tell a client, "Have hope; you matter. But, I won't hire you." It's about walking the talk, not only with its clients, who need to see that Fortune truly believes in their abilities to change, but also with those prospective employers and policymakers whose minds Fortune seeks to influence about the hiring of formerly incarcerated people. As put by CEO Page:

***"What better message and proof that it works than to ourselves affirmatively hire people with histories of incarceration, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and/or homelessness who then give back to their communities and in many cases emerge as powerful advocates for Fortune or powerful leaders for their communities."***

Consistent with its values as an agency, Fortune therefore sees people with histories of incarceration (and substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, homelessness) as assets, not deficits. One senior executive explained:

*We see folks as folks that are capable of being in the workforce, capable of providing the tools and support necessary to do the work of the organization. So that's our starting point. From there it drives everything else.... You can either see people as assets or you can see people as deficits. We see formerly incarcerated people as assets.*

Fortune's hiring practice provides formerly incarcerated men and women not only with meaningful jobs (sometimes their first), but also with pathways to careers and deeply appreciated second chances to prove their worth to

themselves and to society. In the words of one senior case manager:

*It's very important because a lot of society looks down on you, no one wants to give you a second chance, and Fortune not only gives you a second, but third and fourth and fifth chance. ...It is really about showing society that we made mistakes. We had some unfortunate circumstances and if given the opportunity, we can change and we will.*

Fortune provides a ladder to careers that employees climb in accordance with their abilities and level of passion and dedication. For some people, this means proceeding upward step-by-step in quick progression. One staff member interviewed had, in five years, gone from being a client, to an intern, to being hired as a client escort, and then to being promoted in fairly quick succession to group facilitator, treatment plan counselor, and then senior caseworker. During those five years, he also completed numerous trainings, including the nine-month course work and requisite 6,000 hours of fieldwork for a substance abuse counseling license, and found time to co-author a play. Other employees may land higher up on the ladder straight out of prison. One senior management person, who earned his college degree and ran a prison release program while incarcerated, landed a management job at Fortune after his release. He later left Fortune, gained more experience at another nonprofit organization, and came back to Fortune at an even higher level of responsibility. Still others may need to move down the ladder to a job with fewer responsibilities or required skill sets if they fail to develop the skills needed for a job or face a personal crisis that interferes with the responsibilities assigned to them.

## Greater Competitiveness in Obtaining Funding

As discussed earlier in Section I, federal agencies that fund reentry, substance abuse treatment, and HIV/AIDS programs value cultural competency in determining eligibility for receiving grants.<sup>14</sup> Fortune is proud of the fact that SAMHSA recognizes it as a culturally competent provider of substance abuse treatment programs.<sup>15</sup> In one instance, Fortune obtained a million dollar per year contract that it would not have been eligible for had it not been a culturally diverse and culturally competent agency. In short,

14 There is, however, a lack of consistency with respect to government policies. New York State's Parole Department rules prohibit parolees from supervising other parolees in programs that it funds, as, for example, in a drug treatment program. Fortune negotiated a waiver from that rule, convincing Parole that to comply with that rule would compromise program effectiveness and its values as an agency. In arguing that it could not be as effective without hiring parolees, Fortune took a risk at not getting the funding.

15 SAMHSA recognizes Fortune's model of employing people with histories of incarceration and substance abuse to deliver counseling and substance abuse services as a culturally competent model that also "offers a powerful opportunity for offenders to interact with positive role models." "Continuity of Offender Treatment for Substance Use Disorders," 1998. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA), Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) No. 30. Retrieved on October 20, 2010 from [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/bookshelf/br.fcgi?book=hssamhsatip&part=A53936](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/bookshelf/br.fcgi?book=hssamhsatip&part=A53936)

says Fortune, to grow and be effective in delivering services, it behooves reentry agencies to move toward becoming culturally competent service providers.

## C. NUANCED HIRING AND EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

Fortune follows the golden rule in social services work of “do no harm.” Accordingly, job applicants with life experiences shared by the clients and limited or no track records of work must demonstrate that they have achieved stability in their lives and are a good positional fit for a job. To ensure a good fit between agency and client needs on the one hand and Fortune’s goal to provide pathways to careers for the formerly incarcerated on the other, Fortune has developed a carefully considered and nuanced hiring practice that includes: *mitigating the lack of “job readiness”* of many formerly incarcerated people and creating a pipeline of job candidates with a robust volunteer and internship program; *reverse-engineering job profiles* so that Fortune gets the skills and people it really needs to deliver services effectively to clients; and using a *three-axis approach to screening potential candidates*. These components are broad and flexible enough that Fortune uses them for all of its hiring decisions.

### Creating a Pipeline of Job Candidates Through Volunteer and Internship Programs

As of the writing of this Toolkit, 32% of Fortune’s new employees are former Fortune clients. Many of these clients are hired after participating in one of several volunteer and internship programs at Fortune, which function both as ways to expand Fortune’s service capabilities and create “job readiness” in clients who lack a track record of legitimate work.

Fortune’s volunteers generally fall into two groups. One group consists of tutors, who tend to be “straight-world folks” interested in working with Fortune’s clients but, for the most part, are not looking for careers there. The second group of volunteers performs other functions at Fortune and consists largely of current and former clients interested both in helping others and developing work skills. On average there are 30 volunteers of the second type at any given time at Fortune. Fortune also participates in various internship programs that are funded by outside agencies. These involve specific duties and opportunities to interact with Fortune staff and develop work skills. At a minimum, the volunteers and interns get meaningful work and supervision experience that assists them in their personal growth and “work readiness.”

### Reverse-Engineering Job Profiles

Fortune is adamant that while jobs should not be under-professionalized, neither should they be unnecessarily over-professionalized in such a way as to “eliminate a large pool of candidates and people we want.” Accordingly, Fortune basically “reverse-engineers” its job profiles, meaning that it breaks down job roles into their essential components to

identify the skills, personal attributes, bases of knowledge, and prior experience actually needed for any particular job. In so doing, it has adopted the following guidelines:

- » *Eliminate educational requirements that are not necessary* for job performance and would only impose barriers to the hiring of people with relevant life experience. Thus, a college degree is rarely required for a job at Fortune.
- » *Allow alternative experiences to substitute for prior work experience* (e.g., being a mentor or working or volunteering in a human services capacity while in prison).
- » *Treat the life experiences of incarceration, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and/or homelessness, and the recovery/reentry process as strengths and “bonuses”* toward building the agency’s cultural competence.
- » *Identify the kind of person who possesses the skills, core competencies, bases of knowledge, and personal attributes the job requires* (e.g., someone who has been an effective HIV peer educator while incarcerated).

By way of example of “reverse-engineering,” for the position of court advocate, Fortune looks for “a pit-bull with a smile,” that is, a tenacious and persistent person who can advocate respectfully, and who has leadership skills, experience with the criminal justice system, the cultural competence to assess a client in a holding pen and read subtle signs, and the desire to give back. Given the skill set desired, a history of incarceration and substance abuse are considered assets. For the position of counselor, Fortune looks for a person with a sense of mission, good interpersonal skills, baseline writing, computer and documentation skills, and knowledge of incarceration, reentry challenges and substance abuse. Given the needs of the job and the importance of credible role models who can share personal stories of recovery, Fortune has created a “boundary” policy around counselors: *Fortune will only hire counselors with “histories,” unless an exception to that rule is warranted*. Such exceptions occur on a case-by-case basis, when specific skill sets are needed in a program and someone without a “history” is the strongest candidate for hire, but they are sharply limited in number. This reverse-engineering process helps the candidate with life experience qualify for a job *while assuring that the managers who hire new employees are “grounded in what they really want and need” and make objectively-based hiring decisions*. All other things being equal, Fortune will hire the person with a history of incarceration, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS or homelessness.

### Three-Axis Approach to Assessing Job Candidates

Fortune emphasizes that just as people and their circumstances are multi-faceted, so is the assessment of a candidate’s positional fit at Fortune. As Fortune’s CEO explains, when it comes to hiring people with life experiences shared by the clients:

***“We believe two contradictory things at the same time: people have an enormous capacity to change, and also, people tend to be who they’ve been, unless something has happened to change the trajectory. We look for that change and are open to that.”***

To the end of looking for that change in trajectory, Fortune evaluates candidates for employment along three distinct axes:

- » *Personal growth* (e.g., insights gained from relevant life experiences) *and stability* (e.g., sobriety, good coping skills, commitment to nonviolence, experience assuming responsibility in some capacity);
- » *Professional skill level*; and
- » *Track record of experience*, whether of the traditional professional work pattern type or an alternative type from life experience as a person with a history of incarceration, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and/or homelessness.

Any given person can be at different points of a continuum along the three axes, and it is the overall holistic presentation of the candidate and the positional fit to an available job at Fortune that determines a hiring decision.

### **Two Types of Candidates: The “Credentialed” and the “Diamond in the Rough”**

The three-axis approach primarily yields two types of candidates. One is the credentialed type. That is, someone with educational achievements and/or a professional pattern of employment that involves increased increments in job responsibilities. This could be a person with a history of life experiences shared by the clients. For example, some employees with histories of incarceration and/or substance abuse were hired at Fortune after they had earned college degrees and acquired a significant, relevant work history. Even though credentialed, such candidates are still subject to discrimination by some employers and benefit from Fortune’s affirmative hiring of people with life experiences shared by the client population. The second type of candidate is what Fortune refers to as “*Diamond in the Rough*,” those with histories of incarceration, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and/or homelessness who show strong motivation and potential, but lack a traditional education and/or professional work track record, the typically used surrogates for evidence of work competence.

Fortune’s primary tool for the three-axis assessment of a Diamond in the Rough is an in-depth interview. Job candidates at Fortune know its affirmative action policy regarding people with histories shared by the client population and that a criminal background check will be conducted—as has become the norm in social services work—but for many, it is the only place where their histories are discussed openly and seen as potential assets, rather than reasons for rejection.

### **The Interview: An Opportunity to Assess Change in Trajectory and Job Readiness**

During the interview, Fortune looks for evidence of *personal growth*, including respect of self and others, acceptance of responsibility for their own part in their past (which speaks to honesty and maturity), a strong desire to “*give back*” and passion for the work that Fortune does. The agency will also look for signs of “*stability*” (e.g., sobriety and some history of assuming responsibility). The agency assumes that when a person has held any sort of job for a significant period of time, such as one year, this provides strong evidence of stability, regardless of the nature of the work.

One thing that incarcerated people have is time. Therefore, how a person used that time, in an environment that by necessity orients people to self-survival and is not conducive to personal development, is key to assessing whether there has been personal growth and the development of a desire to “*give back*” to others. Fortune’s experience is that some candidates have done amazing things with their “time.” Some examples include individuals who, while incarcerated, created new programs in prison, completed a college degree and then ran a prison pre-release program, mentored other prisoners for years, or became an HIV/AIDS educator after seeing what an HIV+ “*bunky*” [cellmate] was going through.

Assessing core professional skills (e.g., computer skills, documentation and communication skills) of the Diamond in the Rough candidate is not easy, as the usual surrogate indicators of academic milestones and/or job experience may not exist. Formerly incarcerated persons who apply at Fortune typically bring portfolios containing proof of training, internships, in-prison work and treatment programs in which they have participated. Fortune will review those and also give writing assignments to candidates to test basic literacy and communication skills. Skills and work-readiness are verified by checking references and “*tapping into the grapevine*” that Fortune maintains on the streets, with sister agencies and with Parole and Probation. Three references are required of all candidates, and for the Diamonds in the Rough, references may include counselors, caseworkers, ministers or parole or probation officers.

Fortune also assesses the candidate’s overall presentation and attitude. Is he dressed appropriately? Does she use respectful language to talk about Fortune’s clients and the work? Does his body language and response to questions reveal a resistance to feedback and/or authority? Does the candidate with a work track record hate every job she ever had? Fortune will not hire anyone who uses disrespectful language about its client population or who hated every prior job. While Fortune will look generously at the effort made in the candidate’s presentation on paper, as in the cover letter and resume, it sets high standards about the personal presentation the candidate makes, whatever the candidate’s track record.



## Mindfulness About the Number of Diamonds in the Rough the Agency Can Hire

When Fortune has a promising Diamond in the Rough candidate who is strong on axis one (stability and growth) and on axis three (relevant life experience), but the professional skill level may be difficult to assess, it will do one of two things. It may place the person at a more entry-level job (e.g., administrative) and then give the person opportunities to acquire training for the more demanding job (e.g., caseworker). Alternatively, if the candidate is particularly strong and shows evidence of being a very motivated and capable learner, Fortune will incorporate this candidate into the unit to which she applied as a “trainee,” provided the unit director or a supervisor can commit to the on-the-job training and hiring the person will *not* negatively impact program services.<sup>16</sup> Fortune will perform a unit-by-unit assessment to calculate how many Diamond in the Rough “trainees” a unit can feasibly incorporate and provide with an appropriately reduced workload, training and close supervision. This concern does not, of course, apply to the “credentialed” new employee with life experience and a track record of work and/or relevant training.

## D. CAREFUL DESIGN OF ON-THE-JOB SUPPORTS

Fortune has designed and implemented a well thought-out system of training, development, support, and supervision that begins with acclimating new employees to Fortune’s workplace values and norms.

### Passing Down of Agency Values To New Employees

All new employees undergo an orientation, the purpose of which is to explain and model the following values and norms of the agency:

- » *Clients are to be treated the way staff would want their loved ones to be treated should they ever have to walk through Fortune’s doors for services.*
- » *Every client is your client.* If a staff member encounters a client who looks distressed or confused, that person is expected to attend to that client right there and then.
- » *Each employee belongs to each person in management. The doors of managers are always open.* New employees learn that there is an *open door policy* and every person in management is accessible. In the design of their office space, Fortune deliberately chose to have glass partitions so that staff and management could be visible and accessible to each other.

- » *There is no ceiling to how high employees can reach.* This is made potent and tangible to employees every day when they interact with senior level managers who were formerly incarcerated and/or have histories of substance abuse and have steadily risen through the ranks at Fortune. As one senior person put it, *“It’s like a secret weapon. I am the proof of how it works and that it can work.”*

## A Scaffolding Approach to On-the-Job Training

Most Diamonds in the Rough will get a significant amount of one-on-one training with close support and supervision. Fortune adopts a style of “scaffolding” training that involves a close interaction between the manager (teacher) and the trainee. The manager begins with the skills that the trainee possesses and builds upon those, as the manager takes responsibility for aspects of the job the trainee has not yet learned. Over time the trainee acquires and internalizes more skills and needs less and less of a scaffold. For example, trainees at Fortune will often start by “shadowing” someone already in the position for a period of time, before they start to take on the responsibilities of the role. Fortune may use shadowing as a teaching tool for jobs such as group facilitator or court advocate.

Another scaffolding approach is to start the trainee on a reduced caseload and work closely to build the trainee’s skills, gradually increasing the caseload to full capacity. This would be done for a caseworker or discharge planner. Another scaffolding tool is to supplement outside training, (e.g., a course in clinical note taking), with mentoring on that particular skill by a licensed clinician on staff. The key is the interactional and incremental approach to providing on-the-job training.

## Internal and External Classroom Training

Employees are constantly nudged to increase their skill sets with training and formal education.<sup>17</sup> One staff member’s comment reflected internalization of this value: *“Here your rap sheet is part of your resume. But, it is not enough. You need the combination of the two: the academics and the life experience.”* Accordingly, Fortune offers a robust



<sup>16</sup> The salary of the Diamond in the Rough will reflect the trainee status. Fortune believes that it is fair, to the agency and the Diamond in the Rough trainee, that the employee’s salary be set at what the person’s skills and job experience could demand in the market place, and the trainee be given a correspondingly reduced workload until such time as the trainee has proved an ability to meet the job demands fully.

<sup>17</sup> Fortune also nudges its employees to attain higher education degrees and provides an amount for tuition reimbursement.



array of classroom training to either strengthen skill sets for the jobs employees already have (e.g., clinical note-writing, caseworker 101, Death, Dying and Bereavement, computer skills) or to advance them to positions of greater responsibility and skill (e.g., Sole Associates, Inc. trainings on Organizational Change and Leadership.)

Currently, Fortune is in the process of pooling its own in-house expertise to create a *Fortune Society Training Institute*, thereby institutionalizing and expanding on the training that it already provides in-house. It is undergoing a unit-by-unit assessment of training needs and will develop a series of core skill classes that employees must take (e.g., computer skills or training in confidentiality requirements) and electives that employees can choose to take to make them more marketable, whether at Fortune or elsewhere. To create incentives for that, Fortune is devising a system by which points earned in the annual evaluations will be tied to courses taken. The Training Institute will support those employees who struggle to achieve a certain skill level so that their development does not fall through the cracks.<sup>18</sup>

### Customized Support and Supervision

Support and supervision of Diamond in the Rough employees can differ from supervision of other employees in three ways:

- » It can be *more time-consuming* because of their limited work experience. A Diamond in the Rough, after the initial period of on-the-job training, may require more frequent supervision (e.g., every week or every few days, rather than the minimum of every two weeks for others).
- » It can require *acclimating the employee to the environment of work and the outside world*. Some employees at Fortune have served long sentences before they were hired at Fortune. They may have gaps in knowledge about the outside world or expectations about work that are unrealistic.<sup>19</sup> Another type of adjustment stems from the reality that the “*metrics*” of a job in prison may be very different from the “*metrics*” in an outside job, especially around the issue of time (e.g., work hours in a day or the time it should take to manage a task).
- » *Support and supervision may be more personal* because the new Diamond in the Rough employee

may be dealing with his own reentry issues and require a supportive and flexible environment. The employee may need time off during the workday to meet with her parole officer. She may face immigration issues or family reunification challenges.

Fortune mitigates the cost of this customized and multi-faceted support and supervision in several ways. For one thing, Fortune has adopted a *very low ratio between supervisor and staff of one to five*. Fortune’s open door policy further militates against overload of the supervisors, because the *burden of supervision is widely shared* and employees know they can reach out to anyone available. Staff members who were interviewed commented about the value of this open door policy. One employee said:

*Actually, I have a million supervisors (officially, I have only one) because there is an open door policy here. You can go to anyone who is available to talk. We have a really good network here; it’s functioning.*

It helps a great deal that, because Fortune promotes from within, people with life experience are well represented in management. In fact, many of them held the very same jobs they are now supervising; therefore, they understand job stresses and how they impact an employee. Managers know that supervising someone with history shared by the client population means keeping their eyes and ears open for the shadow side to the employee’s close bond with his clients (risk of over-identification) or her passion for the work (risk of over-commitment). In the words of one senior director, having a culturally competent management team means “*We are not managing just from our positions, but from our life experience. It’s like a secret weapon.*” Grateful for the supervision he gets at Fortune, one senior caseworker stated:

*I can get anxious and overwhelmed and this is where supervision comes into play. I look up to them—they are all positive, personally involved, approachable and not elevated, so to speak. They understand me, [and] the experiences. I can speak with them and joke with them.... I get good feedback. They are a good sounding board.*

### Dealing With Lingering “Incarceration” or “Street Life” Norms

Management team members know from their own life experiences and from serving their client population that some Diamonds in the Rough may be “*rough around the edges*” when it comes to accepting criticism or letting go of street and/or incarceration norms, including those that forbid “*ratting*” someone out. As CEO Page explained, “*It is hard for anyone to ‘snitch’ on a client or co-worker, but it is much harder for the formerly incarcerated person whose survival on the streets or in prison quite literally depended on not ‘ratting’ anyone out.*” At work, prison or street norms may show up as reluctance to share troubling client information with the treatment team or some troubling information about the behavior of a co-worker or supervisee. Page

18 In looking back at employees who did not work out, Fortune has learned that certain skills are difficult for some people to learn on the job and are better acquired through a dedicated course. While Fortune’s employee turnover rate compares favorably to other service agencies, even with its substantial hiring of people with histories shared by the client population, to improve further on its retention rate, Fortune has shifted its focus to identifying employees who need improvement and providing the specific trainings needed “*to take people who are at risk and move them back into good standing.*”

19 For example, a person who has had no outside world experience as an adult may have no idea how to select an appropriate venue for a business meeting. An employee who is passionate about his work, as an opportunity to prevent young people from following the same destructive path that he did, will have to learn that he cannot “*save*” his clients against their will and that the final responsibility for change rests with the client.

asserts that skill in addressing these problems with clients will prepare managers to address them in staff supervision:

*Knowing this problem is part of the cultural competence of the managers. It is the nature of the population to have this problem, both as clients and as employees. You see this as an issue and it is a conversation you have with the staff. If you are culturally competent to deal with your clients, than you are culturally competent to deal with those same problems with your staff. It is not that different.*

When a candidate for employment appears to be “rough around the edges,” but holds out promise to work out in the long run, Fortune will place the person in an internship position or in an entry level job (e.g., as a trainee in maintenance or administrative work). In general, new employees at Fortune participate in a six-month introductory period and are then evaluated for continued employment. In some cases, the introductory period can be extended. This gives Fortune the opportunity to test the waters with new employees and determine their job readiness and positional fit.

### Learning from Mistakes and Remaining Vigilant Around Values

Building cultural competence is a never-ending task. Therefore, Fortune looks at achieving cultural competence as a process and continually reflects on and learns from mistakes. Fortune uses these lessons learned to improve hiring practices and on-the-job supports. There is a percentage of people who are let go because they relapse, do not acquire the skills needed, or in some manner violate the values of the organization (e.g., disrespect to a client). It hurts to let someone go and time invested is lost. The protocol in discharging an employee consists of an exit interview (when appropriate and feasible) to learn as much as possible about the circumstances and to improve hiring decisions or supervision, support and/or training. Fortune will look back at the original interview notes to determine, with the advantage of hindsight, whether there had been any red flags that they had either overlooked or erroneously thought would be manageable.

Whether the discharged employee can be rehired is a decision driven by a cost-benefit analysis and guided by Fortune’s values as an agency. Fortune understands that relapse and infractions happen; however, a core agency value is the belief that people can learn and recover from mistakes. If the person has good skills, and the infraction did not involve mistreatment of a client, Fortune will consider rehiring them. Fortune’s CEO explains the logic on this as follows:

*How you handle the hard stuff is where you test your values. So, how we handle those who relapse, break a key agency rule, or significantly violate trust is how we test our values about people’s capacity for change. We may have to fire you, have you prosecuted, but we will still look at you as a human being. We separate the person from the crime. If someone whom we*

*fire can later show us that they can be trusted, we will rehire. The modeling benefits that we get from rehiring a person who regains our trust are powerful.*

### “An Ounce of Cost to a Pound of Benefit”

The Fortune Society began as and remains an agency for and of formerly incarcerated men and women. Fortune’s CEO of over 21 years, JoAnne Page, like the co-founder and CEO before her, David Rothenberg, cannot imagine Fortune doing its work any other way, saying:

*It is an ounce of cost to a pound of benefit. We wouldn’t want to do this work without formerly incarcerated men and women and those with histories of substance abuse, homelessness, and/or HIV/AIDS. It would be like doing the work with one eye covered. With all of us in the room, it’s like being able to see the world in 3-D. The more views you have, the better you see. This is true in our advocacy work, grant proposals, service delivery and design, and in our educating other service providers. We need that diversity and we are better for it.*

***“And, it’s about integrity. If we say we have certain values, then we have to walk the talk. If we want others to take back in people with histories of incarceration, substance abuse, and/or homelessness, we have to do it and promote it.”***

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## Section III: Applying The Fortune Society’s Cultural Competence Hiring Strategies to Other Organizations—The Thames Reach Story

The Fortune Society case study offers a compelling example, supported by the research literature, of how hiring individuals with experiential knowledge matching that of an organization’s clients can result in numerous benefits. However, it is legitimate to wonder whether Fortune’s experience is somewhat unique, in that from the beginning it was shaped by men and women who were formerly incarcerated, and whether its experiences can therefore be applied directly to other organizations. The applicability of Fortune’s practices can be illuminated by a brief look at the evolution in hiring practices of a service provider with a very different history.

Founded in 1984, Thames Reach is a London-based organization that offers a broad range of services to



homeless men and women. It provides housing, training, education, and employment programs and direct services to homeless men and women.<sup>20</sup> Funded by government resources, Thames Reach currently employs 450 men and women and has more than doubled its size over the last ten years. In 2005, Thames Reach employees included only a small percentage (six percent) of former users of services for the homeless, i.e., those with experiential knowledge of the journeys of Thames Reach clients. In 2010, approximately 23% of the 450 employees (i.e., 103) are former services users.

According to Jeremy Swain, President of Thames Reach, it was a 2003 visit to The Fortune Society in New York City that inspired the agency to re-engineer its hiring model to promote, in his words, “using service users in the workforce to transform lives.” Swain recounts being shown around Fortune’s West Harlem supportive housing facility by

*A highly articulately clear man with a great grasp of his job and very passionate about what Fortune was attempting to achieve, [who] then told us as a part of his delivery [that] he was formerly incarcerated [and] still using the services. We were very taken by the added value his experience brought to the job and his*

*very clear commitment to being an inspirational role model to the people living there.*

Upon learning that more than half of Fortune’s staff members were former users of services, a model of success that he had not previously seen, Swain was inspired to take this approach back to London. After receiving funding in 2005, Thames Reach launched a program called “GROW” (Giving Real Opportunities for Work). The program’s goal was for Thames Reach to increase its hiring of former service users (people struggling with homelessness and the co-occurring problems of substance abuse and incarceration). For the first two years, GROW focused largely on internal cultural change and training cohorts of clients to be work ready. Some of the highlights of the GROW program include:

- » Reviewing and revising employment guidelines and codes of practice;
- » Establishing criteria for minimal competencies required in staff positions;
- » Revising recruitment procedures;
- » Developing routes into employment for service users;
- » Creating a nine-month (currently 12-month) trainee program to give service users the opportunities to develop work skills and receive on-the-job training; and<sup>21</sup>
- » Setting specific annual targets of percentage increases in the hiring of prior service users and/or those with experiential knowledge of homelessness and co-occurring problems.

Five years after the launch of GROW, and reflecting on this new hiring policy and its impact on meeting the agency’s mission, Swain said:

*There is logic behind doing it.... [that is] unstoppable. If you are going to say to the public, the corporate sector, the world around, ‘You must believe in hiring these people’ and ‘they can change their lives,’ it is absurd not to be able to show that yourself by employing them. And second, if you can do it successfully and these people work well in the organization, the impact they can have on other people is profound, and it can help you achieve your objectives, your targets, your mission far more quickly than if you don’t have them with you.*

Thames Reach’s hiring model has had a series of impressive results, including:

- » Improved service experience for the clients;
- » More efficient restructuring of how the agency delivers its services;
- » Reduced cost of the service delivery teams;
- » Reduced costs of recruiting employees as a result of

<sup>20</sup> The information about Thames Reach was obtained through a telephone interview with its CEO Jeremy Swain and a review of its website publications and a commissioned study, published in 2010, describing its experience in and analyzing the costs of adopting hiring practices to employ former service users. The report, authored by Kevin Ireland of Compendium Consulting, is titled: “Walking the walk: An exploration of the costs and benefits of service user employment in homelessness organizations,” Final Report, January 2010, and can be downloaded from: <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/what-we-do/user-employment/costsand-benefits/>

<sup>21</sup> While Thames Reach does not guarantee an offer of employment to its trainees, its experience has been that the overwhelming majority successful complete the training and most receive offers of employment from Thames Reach and a few from other service agencies (Ireland 2010).

- the in-house trainee program;
- » Enhanced ability to influence policymakers; and
- » Positive impact on the organization's culture (Ireland 2010).

This last result is embodied in Swain's observation that staff members *without* experiential knowledge now view their client population as people capable of successful change. There is no "*poverty of expectations*." All of this has come to the attention of government bodies in the UK. Thames Reach has received two years worth of funding to convince and train *other* organizations across the UK to follow their lead.

Having quadrupled the percentage of its staff with experiential knowledge of homelessness, substance abuse, and incarceration in just five years—primarily by hiring from its trainee program—Thames Reach's experience illuminates how an organization with more traditional hiring practices can relatively quickly achieve significantly greater diversity in staffing. Swain reports that the biggest challenge at Thames Reach was the initial "*cultural resistance*" of its staff. Some of it surfaced in the form of understandable questions that later turned out to be rather straightforward to address, such as whether formerly homeless people might still be "*carrying too much baggage to make the adjustment of working for...[an] organization;*" would have problems handling client confidentiality; or should disclose their own histories to clients.

It is instructive to note that Thames Reach spent the first two years of GROW mindfully dealing with agency culture issues, while simultaneously beginning to incorporate former service users into the agency, initially as trainees. It did not launch affirmative *hiring* for staff positions until 2007, by which time some of the culture issues had been effectively addressed. Today, the agency's staff believes it would be "*decidedly odd*" if they were not employing people with a history of homelessness. Not only do *clients* benefit from their interactions with staff members with experiential knowledge, but also *staff members* without the histories of homelessness (and drug addiction and incarceration) learn from personal stories that are now shared at Thames Reach. Additionally, having staff with experiential knowledge has better prepared Thames Reach to implement and be a catalyst for the new UK model of delivering services called "*personalization*," by which certain "*paternalistic*" elements of delivering services are eliminated in favor of giving more authority to the client to determine needs. Having staff that were former service users gives Thames Reach a distinct advantage adapting to this change. The new understandings at Thames Reach about issues such as boundaries, the paternalism in "*poverty of expectations*," and the value of sharing personal stories has added to its cultural competence and impacted how it delivers services. Swain notes that staff members are proud of the way the organization has "*embraced the change*" in its hiring practices.

All this was accomplished without lowering hiring standards or adding to overall organizational overhead.

With respect to standards, Swain says that in training and hiring former service users, it look sfor and gets "*exactly the same skill level as you do from anybody else*." He added:

*We do have to reach high standards. That's partly why it's so exciting. We've done this without lowering standards. We've made this investment in the quality of the workforce, and its range of experiences is just growing, and as a result we provide a better service from where we were five years ago.*

To justify (or not) the costs of implementing and continuing GROW and its nine-month (now 12-month) trainee programs, Thames Reach commissioned an economic study of those costs (Ireland 2010). That report concluded that the costs of the trainee programs and other elements of GROW were more than absorbed by the organization's gains in productivity, the decreased costs of service delivery teams from the lower salaries for trainees, the decreased costs in recruitment, and the benefits gained agency-wide from its reappraisal of systems, standards and procedures. The net result has been **lowered costs without any reduction in quality of services** (Ireland 2010). The benefits of Thames Reach's GROW trainee program have been so impressive that in 2007 the organization decided to harmonize it with all of its other training programs, so that now all new hires, irrespective of whether they have experiential knowledge or not, undergo this training. In that same year, a target was set that 50% of all new trainees should be people with experience with homelessness (Ireland 2010).

The Thames Reach story demonstrates that an organization, even one that is mature and growing, can change its hiring strategy to value and honor experiential knowledge. It also provides a powerful example that a large organization with a different cultural and historical context from Fortune's can nonetheless successfully adopt similar hiring practices.

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## Section IV: Developing Cultural Competence Through Hiring and Development Practices: Getting Started Today

The purpose of this section is to provide you with some promising practices for building cultural competence through hiring and developing individuals with life histories similar to the clients your organization serves. Should your organization choose to adopt such hiring practices, it is important to do so with the *current* legal and government grant-making landscape in mind. These landscapes have changed dramatically since the late 1960s. Fortune's own hiring and staff development practices have evolved in response to these forces, as well as from its 40+ years of experience in hiring men and women with experiential knowledge and limited work histories.



## A. MAKING THE CASE TO YOUR AGENCY: CHANGING CULTURE

Perhaps your organization has already identified cultural competency as an organizational goal. If this is the case, highlight to your employees and board members how hiring individuals with experiential knowledge helps in building competence. Should your agency decide to broaden its hiring practices, be prepared to communicate agency-wide the benefits and challenges you anticipate. Additionally, outline how hiring practices and staff development strategies will change.

### Principles of Effective Organizational Change

Depending on your leadership experience, you may be familiar with the principles of organizational change. There is a large body of literature that describes the processes and practices of successful change (e.g., Burke 2002, Kotter 2002), some of which may be particularly useful here. Kotter (2002) refers to eight steps of successful organizational change that are important to keep in mind should your organization decide to employ culturally competent hiring practices. They are:

- » **Make it urgent.** Inspire staff and explain how the objectives of the change are compelling.
- » **Build the right team to help lead the change.** Team members need a strong sense of emotional commitment, the right mix of skills, and to come from numerous levels within the organization.
- » **Create a clear vision of the desired future and strategy to get there.**
- » **Communicate effectively and frequently.** Make the messages simple (with intellectual and emotional appeal) and provide opportunities to hear employee concerns and suggestions.
- » **Remove barriers to change.** Leadership support is critical to help remove obstacles and provide encouragement.
- » **Create short-term wins.** Set early goals that are easy to achieve and meet them.
- » **Don't give up.** Foster and encourage determination and persistence and report on ongoing progress.
- » **Make change "stick."** Reinforce the change through all aspects of the culture.

### Identify the Reasons to Adopt Culturally Competent Hiring Practices

As identified in the list above, the first step of successful organizational change is to inspire staff and explain how the objectives of the change are compelling. An organizational shift to culturally competent hiring practices is particularly timely given these emerging developments:

- » The scope of the reentry crisis and the key role employment plays in creating stability for men and women returning home from prison.
- » The evolving legal landscape regarding employment discrimination including the EEOC's new initiative E-RACE (Eradicating Racism and Colorism from

Employment) and the "Ban the Box" movement discussed in Section I. Such initiatives highlight an increased interest at the federal and local levels to change discriminatory policies and influence attitudes in hiring decisions.

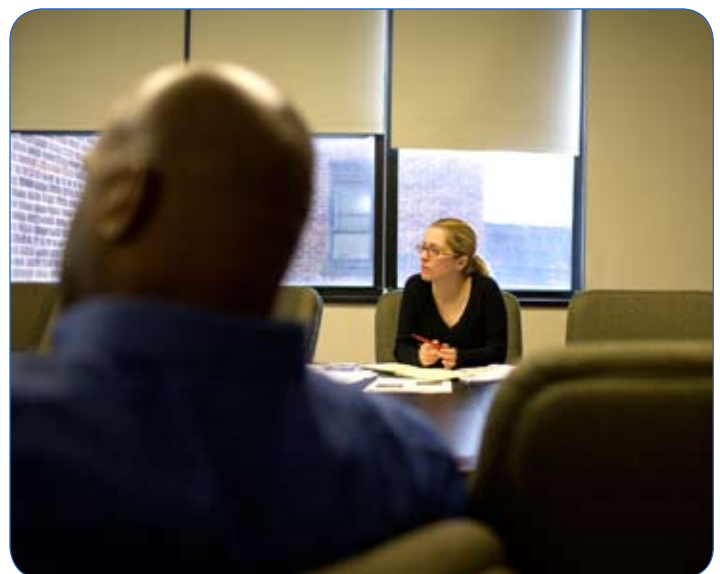
- » The research documenting the powerful impact staff that have successfully navigated the reentry/recovery process have on *clients*.
- » The increasing number of government funding opportunities for culturally competent agencies.

### Openly Discuss the Challenges and Concerns

Depending upon your organization's history and employee population, staff members may be concerned that hiring men and women without traditional social services credentials will negatively impact the quality of services provided to your clients. Or, they may be uneasy about working directly with individuals who have the same history of incarceration, addiction and/or homelessness as your organization's client population. Some employees may believe it is important to maintain boundaries between staff and clients and that hiring staff with life histories similar to those of clients may break down these boundaries. To help overcome any unease, offer employees opportunities to voice their concerns, taking care they are not made to feel they are "wrong" for sharing them. Present a realistic view of the anticipated challenges. Additionally, organizational leadership can model the acceptance of two beliefs that may seem at odds:

1. Hiring men and women with experiential knowledge and limited work histories will strengthen your organization's cultural competence and service delivery capabilities, *and*
2. Hiring such women and men may result in some initial discomfort and will require sensitivity, flexibility and change.

Involving employees from all parts of the organization in crafting the changes to hiring and staff development practices should lead to broader buy-in.



## B. RETOOL YOUR HIRING PROCESS

### Assess Organizational Capacity to Absorb Employees with Life Experience and Minimal Employment Histories

As your organization retools hiring processes to include new employees with experiential knowledge and limited employment histories, consider how many of this type of employee (which Fortune calls their “Diamonds in the Rough”) can be integrated into your agency at any given time. These employees will typically require more training and time-intensive supervision, and may also take longer to achieve the same level of skill and productivity as employees with more traditional backgrounds and work experience. Therefore, you may wish to set hiring targets over time, taking into account both the pace of culture change efforts and organizational capacity to support and develop “Diamonds in the Rough.”

### Attract and Recruit Candidates with Experiential Knowledge

In order to attract the best possible candidates, a successful recruitment campaign is a critical first step. Good candidates can be identified in a variety of ways:

- » Consider hiring from your own client population. You can make clients aware of your job postings and ask staff for suggestions about current or previous clients who might be a good fit.
- » Reach out to other service providers, Parole, and Probation and let them know your organization is looking to hire staff with life histories. Do all that you can to generate “word-of-mouth” buzz.
- » Highlight your organization’s interest in employing individuals with experiential knowledge in promotional materials. When posting job descriptions, affirmatively state that relevant life experience is an advantage for jobs at your organization. Avoid including requirements that are not actually needed for the position (e.g., a college degree or a certain minimal amount of prior experience).

### Create Work Readiness and Expand Recruitment: Internship, Volunteer and Trainee Programs

A powerful approach, used by both Fortune and Thames Reach, to create work readiness in clients and other potential candidates with experiential knowledge is through volunteer, internship, and trainee programs.<sup>22</sup> With respect to internship and volunteer programs, the maximum value to the organization and participants occurs when the tasks assigned involve duties that develop marketable work skills and appropriate workplace mindsets. Interns and volunteers become known entities to the organization’s employees, leaders, and participants, in turn, get to know organizational values and ways of operating. After organizational involvement, the offer of employment

<sup>22</sup> As has been the case for Fortune and Thames Reach, you may be able to identify some outside funding to cover costs and pay stipends.

becomes a logical next step that is based on mutual knowledge rather than a leap of faith. Another benefit is that interns and volunteers develop social and work skills under conditions that are less stressful than those of a full-time job. Moreover, non-paid, or minimally paid, positions allow for individuals receiving government benefits to continue doing so while becoming more marketable. Finally, intern and volunteer programs offer more “person power” to the organization than the payroll alone can provide.

A trainee position differs as the individual is trained for a specific job at the organization. Trainees are placed in positions on a trial basis, with an offer of employment dependent on satisfactory performance.<sup>23</sup> Trainees are usually compensated at less than the salary of a person with prior work experience and/or training, but at a level at least commensurate with what they can command in the marketplace, given their skills and experience. The trainee program is valuable to an agency by increasing people power in a cost effective way, training people in accordance with their needs, and exercising informed decisions about making firm offers of employment. The trainee, in turn, gains a valuable apprenticeship and a good shot at a job.

## C. IDENTIFY CRITICAL JOB REQUIREMENTS

A promising practice that can be derived from Fortune’s experience is the adoption of the “reverse engineering” of job descriptions. Fortune’s managers, in cooperation with Human Resources (HR) staff, identify the skills, personal attributes, knowledge, and experience *actually* required to perform a job and exclude criteria that are not necessary. Adopting this approach means that your organization will be less likely to “over-professionalize” a job, eliminating, as Fortune puts it, “a large pool of candidates ... (that you) want.” It is important that HR and the hiring manager collaborate in the “reverse-engineering” job definition process. It is the



<sup>23</sup> In the case of Thames Reach, which has a formalized 12-month trainee program, it is explicit up front that there is no guarantee of employment once the training has been completed. Since 2005, most participants have completed the program and Thames Reach or another employer has hired them (Ireland 2010).

HR manager who brings a broader view of the organization and can provide insights into individual job definitions that may be applicable across jobs (and across managers).<sup>24</sup>

## D. THE PROCESS OF ASSESSING CANDIDATES WITH EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

### Adopt the Three-Axis Approach to Assessment of Job Candidates

Fortune's three-axis approach to the evaluation of job candidates complements the reverse-engineering job description process. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of individuals, Fortune considers three axes when looking at a job candidate:

- » Stability and personal growth;
- » Professional skill level; and
- » Track record of experience (either traditional or alternative life experiences).

A hiring decision should be based on a holistic evaluation of the individual. With respect to considering track records of experience for people with life histories, it is critical to look for substitutes for traditional prior work experience. For formerly incarcerated individuals, many of these alternative experiences will have taken place in prison (e.g., being a mentor, running a release program, being a GED instructor). It is critical to treat the life histories a job candidate shares with the client population (e.g., incarceration, substance abuse, homelessness) as *strengths* rather than *liabilities*. It is this experiential knowledge that facilitates cultural competence in the delivery of services and creates powerful role models.

### The Interview: Getting a True Read on the Three Axes and Candidates' Capabilities

A well-designed and in-depth interview process will provide your organization with the best opportunity to collect data across the three axes. Candidates who have life history backgrounds and minimal work experience may view interviews as minefields, making it difficult for them to express their experiences, strengths, and struggles.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the way in which the interview is conducted is very important. The interviewer's knowledge about incarceration, substance abuse, and homelessness, and his/her ease and comfort in discussing them, is key to ensuring a "true read" on the candidate's full range of capabilities and positional fit.

There are several strategies a staff member can adopt to facilitate an interview that yields insight about the candidate, including:

- » Specify up front the organization's *commitment to being an equal opportunity employer*.
- » Invite the candidate to be *open about his/her history*, emphasizing that experiences such as incarceration, substance abuse and homelessness (and the recovery from same) are viewed as advantages at the organization.<sup>26</sup>
- » Help to *de-stigmatize the unvarnished discussion of his/her life history*. Not only is the information important for potential employers, but also sharing of his/her personal story may be cathartic for the candidate. It also provides good practice for sharing with future clients and possibly future employers.
- » If required, inform candidates of the organization's use of *background checks*. The motivation for being open about one's history should remain positive, not punitive.
- » *Solicit information related to the three axes discussed above*. Through the use of open-ended questions, the interviewer can obtain information about a candidate's level of personal growth and stability.

To solicit information, questions should be geared toward opening the door to conversation in a natural and unforced way. For instance, since the candidate will already know your organization places a premium on experiential knowledge relevant to the client population, simple questions such as "*Tell me about yourself;*" or, "*I notice this gap in your work history. Can you tell me about that?*" or, "*I see you have volunteered as a mentor to prisoners. Can you tell me about that?*" or "*How did you get from there [incarceration brought up in conversation] to here?*" may help to generate conversation about the candidate's life experiences and journey of personal growth. The interviewer should listen for evidence that the candidate has taken responsibility for his/her life choices, has learned from them, is self-aware about what it takes to avoid self-destructive activities, and has future goals—all of which have been identified by the literature as signs of desistance and the adoption of a prosocial orientation.

Determining stability in recovery or desistance from crime (axis 1) can be more difficult with a candidate who has a limited employment history and a recent history of reentry/recovery. Given the employment challenges often experienced by individuals recently released from prison, Fortune defines employment stability as being *employed in any job for a year*. Insights to stability and personal growth can also be garnered by exploring the details of long-term participation in programs or commitments that candidates have maintained over time, especially those that involve "giving back" to others.

The assessment of professional skills (axis 2) can also be challenging. Formerly incarcerated job candidates,

24 Several examples of reverse engineering job descriptions can be found in Section II.

25 At Fortune, clients interested in applying for jobs are enrolled in a course that prepares them for the interview, helps them build a resume and portfolio of achievements, and advises them on how to discuss their history.

26 Of course, the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employers from asking direct questions about disabilities (including HIV/AIDS and past substance abuse problems). Employers can ask if a candidate is currently engaged in illegal drug use. [http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/foia/letters/2008/ada\\_illegal\\_drug.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/foia/letters/2008/ada_illegal_drug.html).



especially if coached by an agency, mentor or parole officer, will likely have portfolios with certificates of completion from in-prison work and/or treatment programs, trainings, and internships. Encourage candidates to bring such documentation to the interview and allow them to talk about these experiences. The development and use of a writing test or another measure of literacy is also helpful in assessing professional skills.

Training staff on your agencies' interviewing process is a worthwhile investment. Role playing interviews with reticent mock applicants, for example, will allow staff to hone their interviewing, listening, and assessment skills and receive feedback on their approach. Fortune conducts a minimum of two interviews per candidate. For high-level management positions, the second interview will be before a panel of interviewers. For Fortune, having the HR director do an initial screening interview has been a successful technique. A partnership between HR and line management makes particular sense when interviewing applicants with non-traditional backgrounds as HR managers likely hold a broader view of organizational needs. They are also more likely to be familiar with the details of training opportunities.

### References and Background Checks

With any potential new hire, references will need to be checked. For applicants with traditional backgrounds, requiring three references is typical. The same should be required of candidates with life experience; however, interviewers may need to be more flexible with respect to the time period in which the reference interacted with the candidate (e.g., someone the candidate has known since before incarceration or shortly after incarceration). Interviewers might also need to broaden the range of experiences the references will attest to. It is most helpful to speak to references that can provide evidence of personal growth and stability, as well as a positive track record of alternative experiences.

Whether or not to conduct background checks, and when, is an important decision. Due to liability concerns and grant requirements, it is a common practice in the social services field. However, the decision to conduct background checks must be informed by Title VII and state and local laws. After having acquired information about an applicant's criminal conviction record, you will need to decide how the information will be used, which must also be informed by the laws in your state or local jurisdiction and Title VII, as discussed in Section I.

### Know Who Is Not a Good Fit for Your Organization

Fortune and the research literature place a high premium on evidence related to the candidate's ability to accept responsibility for the behaviors that contributed to his/her life experiences. A candidate who blames others or minimizes his/her own actions should raise concerns, as it often indicates a lack of personal growth and awareness. Such a candidate will not be capable of modeling to clients

the self-awareness and accountability that is necessary for clients' successful reintegration into society and/or recovery.

Another sign that a candidate might not be a good fit is if he or she speaks or behaves in ways that might be viewed as negative or damaging to clients. Use of language that feels disrespectful or volatile may be a symptom of underlying cognitions or emotions that do not support the type of climate your organization provides to clients. Or, the candidate may lack the desire to "give back" or passion for the work that your organization does. Reentry and recovery work can be hard and stressful; therefore, employees with passion are invaluable. An interviewer, then, should trust his/her judgment when candidates do not convey the characteristics or have the track record to indicate they are ready and/or a good fit for serving clients.

## E. TRAINING, SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION STRATEGIES

Once an employee with a history that mirrors your client population is hired, there are six practices that help to ensure that the needs of the organization, clients and employees are met most effectively. They are:

- » Effective agency orientation;
- » Job-training;
- » Continuing support, development and education;
- » Close supervision;
- » Regularly scheduled evaluations; and
- » Quick, assertive responses when issues arise.

Orientations, training programs, and systems of supervision or evaluation should not differ between employees with traditional work and educational histories and those without. Rather, organizational-wide policies and practices should be adopted that support the retention and development of all staff. The following sections will explore these strategies more in-depth.

### Orientation: Acclimate New Employees to the Agency and Assign Them a "Buddy"

New employees with experiential knowledge and minimal professional work experience will likely have anxiety about fitting in and doing well. Therefore, induct them into the agency in a way that will ease their anxieties. Expectations about work should also be managed and it should be made clear that while they have special and valuable experiential knowledge, they are *not* accorded special status. In addition to the HR information typically shared at a new employees orientation, include information about:

- » The mission, ethos, code of conduct, and overall culture of the agency (how are clients, colleagues, managers and others to be treated);
- » Etiquette in dress code, appropriate use of computers, respectful language;
- » Safety information, including how to respond to a threat of harm from a client;



- » Expectations about timeliness, sick and vacation leave, meal breaks, hours of work;
- » Guidelines around disclosing one's history with clients and colleagues;
- » Coping with stress;
- » Explanation of training, support, supervision and evaluation; and
- » Introductions to or by the leadership of the agency.

At orientation, new employees should be assigned a *buddy*. The *buddy* should be an experienced member of staff or management who volunteers to help acclimate the new employee to the work environment but plays no supervisory role. For example, the *buddy* can take the new employee out to lunch on the first day, show the employee around the workplace (e.g., explaining how to use the office machinery), give insights into workplace culture and client/employee relationships, and check in on the new employee frequently (at least once a week initially). Not only will this help the new employee feel welcomed and supported, but also veteran staff members will assume a shared responsibility for the success of the new hire.

## Training New Employees

### 1. Three General Training Approaches

Most new employees typically receive some form of on-the-job training, particularly if they are starting in a new line of work or just beginning their work careers. On-the-job training is especially critical for new employees with experiential knowledge and minimal work experience. Depending on agency size and other factors, such as growth and turnover rates, you may choose between three types of training programs:

- » **A centralized and formalized training program** with classroom type training. The program can vary in length from one to several months, depending on the job, skill sets and knowledge required. It can be followed by probationary placement in a job position, after which the employee is evaluated and may or may not be hired.
- » **An organic, non-centralized training program** that primarily relies on one-on-one training and close supervision, supplemented with formal classroom type training as needed to advance skills. The classroom training may be spread over time

as the new employee advances in positions or as additional skill sets and new bases of knowledge are required for the employee to master his/her job (e.g., clinical note-taking or documentation course for counselors).

- » **A hybrid centralized and organic approach** that begins with group classroom training, followed by job placement that is interspersed with additional one-on-one or classroom training.

Large agencies undergoing a period of rapid growth or turnover might hire a cohort of new employees and offer *formal, centralized classroom type training* to ensure uniform instruction on core competencies at the very beginning of their tenure with the organization. This is especially useful if most of the new hires are in one job category. For example, for the position of counselor, the training might include *core skills training* (e.g., counseling 101, motivational interviewing, clinical note-taking, needs and risks assessments, treatment planning, interpersonal skills, computer skills); *knowledge-based training* (e.g., information about disability benefits, community resources); and *agency code of conduct and practices training* (e.g., confidentiality polices, strategies for disclosing one's history to clients, dealing with stress, office etiquette and dress code).

For a small to medium sized agency and/or an agency that hires a few new employees each year, an *organic, non-centralized approach* that focuses on one-on-one training is likely to be more appropriate. Some agencies that hire a sizeable number of people per year may, as does Thames Reach, *combine the two approaches*. At Thames Reach, new cohorts of trainees, including those with traditional employment histories, participate in a 12-month program in which they receive a month of centralized classroom instruction, followed by placement in a job that is interspersed with additional classroom training days and ad hoc training as needed throughout the one-year traineeship.<sup>27</sup>

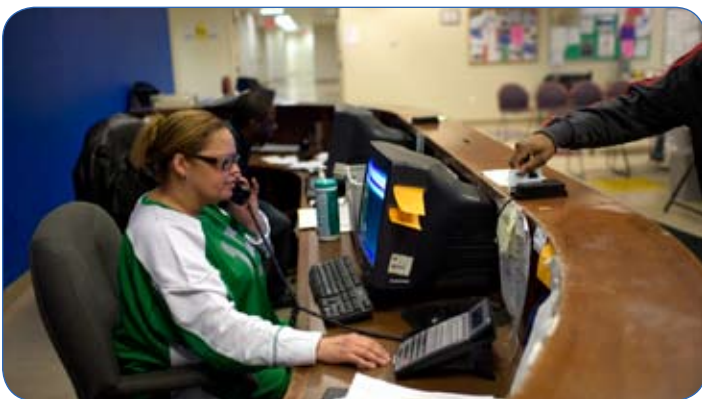
Another practice to consider is forming partnerships with other reentry agencies and/or local colleges or training institutes to provide continuing education classes, thus sharing expertise, space and costs.

### 2. The Scaffolding Approach to One-on-One Training

Whatever the training approach (e.g., centralized classroom training, organic, decentralized approach, or hybrid training), there will be a need for some direct one-on-one training, especially for those new employees with valuable experiential knowledge but limited work experience or training. For this one-on-one training, a good practice to adopt is the method of instruction known as "*scaffolding*."<sup>28</sup>

27 For detailed information about the Thames Reach training approach see <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/what-we-do/user-employment/employing-service-users/traineeships/induction-and-training/>

28 *Scaffolding instruction*, as a teaching strategy, derives from the socio-cultural theory work of Lev Vygotsky and his concept of "*zone of proximal development*" (ZPD). The ZPD is basically the distance



Scaffolding instruction is incremental and involves a close interaction between a supervisor, manager, or senior employee—as the instructor—and the trainee. The instructor selects activities or work skills that are just beyond what the trainee can do alone. Starting with the skills and knowledge the trainee possesses, the instructor builds on these, bringing the trainee to the next level. As the trainee works on advancing his/her skills, the instructor takes responsibility for aspects of the job the trainee has not yet learned. Over time, the trainee acquires more skills and needs less supervision. Scaffolding techniques include:

- » Simplifying or breaking down the task to make it more manageable;
- » Providing specific instruction, expectations and encouragement;
- » Incorporating simultaneous evaluation and feedback;
- » Modeling the behaviors or skills at issue;
- » Role-playing;
- » Allowing the trainee to “*shadow*” someone already in the position; and
- » Starting the trainee on a reduced caseload and, as the trainee’s skills grow, increasing the caseload to full capacity.

## Continuing Education and the Assignment of Life Coaches

The professionalization of social service and nonprofit work, and the increasingly demanding documentation requirements imposed on grant recipients, puts pressure on agencies to **continually provide training opportunities** to their employees. With respect to employees with minimal work histories, the importance of continuing education goes beyond the need of the agency to maintain standards of expected competencies and includes developing these employees so that they have **true opportunities for pathways to careers**. Those pathways could be lateral (e.g., going from caseworker to senior caseworker to supervising caseworker) or vertical (e.g., going from court advocate to working in the policy and development unit of the agency). Accordingly, agencies should encourage and facilitate<sup>29</sup> higher education opportunities, or the obtaining of trainings/certifications, such as for substance abuse counseling. Besides providing courses in core skills (e.g., computer skills, clinical note-taking, HIV/AIDS support), a way to open pathways to careers is for agencies to support employees in taking coursework in a range of areas such as leadership skills, budgeting, grant-writing, or conflict resolution in the work place.

A recommended practice to assist employees in developing a pathway to a career is for agencies to **assign**

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between what an individual can do by herself, based on her skills, experience and knowledge, and the next learning steps that will ultimately help her achieve competence and independence and become a self-regulating learner and problem solver (Hartman 2002).

29 This can be done through salary increases or through incentives such as earning points in performance review evaluations.

**a life coach to new employees.** A life coach (who, like a *buddy*, could be an experienced employee or manager, but not the employee’s direct supervisor) volunteers to meet periodically (e.g., quarterly) with new employees during their first few years to, among other things:

- » Discuss where the employee’s interests lie within the agency;
- » Identify skills needed for advancement and relevant courses or trainings;
- » Explore career interests that might result in finding employment outside the agency; and
- » Offer support and counseling around adjustments to work.

## Responding to Different Supervision Needs

The supervision of employees with life histories that mirror the organization’s client population will be more intensive for the first year or two, until appropriate skill levels are achieved and the employee has adjusted to the environment and stresses of work and reentry/recovery. The supervision of such employees may differ from supervision of other employees in three ways:

- » Due to limited work history and diminished social skills from incarceration or surviving very marginally on the streets, supervision will likely be *more frequent and time-consuming*. Initially, a supervisor may need to meet with new employees every few days or once a week.
- » Because some employees may have served long prison sentences, supervision of employees with experiential knowledge may *involve acclimating the employee to the outside world and dealing with lingering “street code” or “incarceration code” attitudes and beliefs, such as that “snitching” about a client or colleague is wrong*.
- » If the employee is in recovery or still facing reentry issues (e.g., parole supervision, child support, family unification issues, problems acquiring stable housing), supervision may be more personal and require a supportive and flexible environment. Supervisors may need to pay special attention to the potential dangers of *burning out, getting overwhelmed or over-identifying with a client’s reentry/recovery vulnerabilities*.

Given these needs, the standard type of supervision—in which an employee reports directly to one supervisor who deals primarily with work-related issues—will likely be inadequate. At Fortune, the more intense, hybrid supervision of work and personal issues is handled in several ways. First, Fortune has a low one-to-five ratio of supervisors to staff. Second, there is an open door policy in which *every* supervisor is available as a resource and support to *each* employee. Third, because Fortune’s management includes a high number of individuals with histories of incarceration and substance abuse, they can supervise *from their life experience and first-hand understanding of the issues of reentry/recovery and how it adds to the stress of working*.

If your agency is just beginning to launch culturally competent hiring practices, you may consider the supervision approach adopted by Thames Reach. At Thames Reach there is a “*delineated supervision and support*” model, meaning that a dedicated supervisor provides the work-related support and supervision, and a dedicated life coach or mentor provides the career development and personal support. Additionally, each employee is assigned a buddy for other day-to-day work stress issues.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the responsibilities of support and supervision are shared.

Organizations might also consider offering training to management to increase their cultural competence skills in supervising employees with life histories that mirror the client population. However, because managers provide services to clients, they have already acquired some cultural competence.

### Periodically Evaluate New Employees

It is important to formally evaluate new employees on a regular basis during their first year—quarterly, if possible, but minimally at the end of six months and again at 12 months. As they undergo training, they should be provided with frequent feedback, encouragement and constructive criticism. This will help reduce the anxiety new employees may feel, enhance their self esteem, and enable them to stay focused on areas where they need to work harder. They will also learn how to receive feedback, and, through modeling supervisors, learn how to give constructive feedback. If there are group trainings, the new employees can practice giving and receiving feedback to each other, a skill they will need when working with their clients. To increase a new employee’s ability to self-reflect and cement their new learning, consider having them keep daily journals of progress made and areas in need of improvement.

Formal ongoing evaluations of new employees in terms of competencies achieved and gaps in learning and development is valuable for all agencies. Assessment tools should list the key skills, knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes employees are expected to have for their current position. Tools should also allow the trainees/new employees to share thoughts about the trainings and trainers, how they are getting on in their new positions, and self-reflection. A quarterly or semi-annual review will help to detect problems early and respond accordingly, as well as to recognize progress made and boost confidence.

### Responding When Issues Arise and Learning from Mistakes

When management detects a problem in an employee (whether it is a timeliness issue, unexcused absences, disrespectful language, etc.), it is important to respond quickly and appropriately. The safety to clients and workplace demands prompt handling of infractions of agency rules or practices. Responses will vary with the circumstances of the infraction, but one thing that should

be a constant is the employee with life experience should be treated neither more favorably nor more punitively than any other employee. To do otherwise invites resentment and undermines accountability and the integrity of the organization.

If an employee is discharged, it is recommended that a protocol be in place that includes conducting an exit interview, when at all possible, to learn about the circumstances and improve hiring decisions, training, support, and/or supervision going forward. Looking back at the original interview notes, as Fortune does, may help identify, with the advantage of hindsight, whether there were any red flags that may have been overlooked or minimized.

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## Conclusion

This toolkit addresses how agencies can build “cultural competence,” (i.e., the behaviors, attitudes and policies that allow them to work most effectively with clients from various racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds and with differing life experiences) through the practice of hiring men and women with similar backgrounds and life experiences as the clients whom they serve. In many instances, individuals with the same experiential knowledge as the agency’s client population *do not have the work experience* nor the academic credentials that traditional employees do and so the agency’s hiring and development practices must be adapted thoughtfully in order to maximize success. The importance and urgency of the hiring of individuals with experiential knowledge is supported by many current forces—cultural, legal and practical—and reinforced by the significant research evidence of this practice’s positive impact on agencies, employees and clients when managed well.

The experiences of two agencies are highlighted here: one, The Fortune Society, founded by and with formerly incarcerated individuals (i.e., members of the agency’s client base) and two, Thames Reach, who decided to adapt their hiring policies (by hiring those with the experience of homelessness) in order to build cultural competence after some twenty years of existence. While the histories and, in some instances, the practices of the two agencies differ, both of their stories give testimony to the great benefits and accompanying challenges of hiring men and women with deep and relevant experiential knowledge and without the traditional track records of employment and education.

In the last section of the toolkit, some promising hiring and employee development practices are offered that can help build your organization’s cultural competence. They are based in the policies, approaches and experiences of Fortune and Thames Reach and their effectiveness is reinforced by the research literature. For most agencies, adapting these practices will result in significant changes to their operations; therefore, there are also evidence-based

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30 See <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/what-we-do/user-employment/employing-service-users/traineeships/support-for-trainees/>



recommendations for effectively leading change so as to increase buy-in and ownership across your organization. Of course, each organization is different and the promising practices must be adapted to the specific culture, mission, practices, and policies of your agency.

For more details about developing cultural competence through hiring and employee development practices, see the extensive reference list below. Or you may contact the Fortune Society at [www.fortunesociety.org](http://www.fortunesociety.org).

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**PHOTOS BY: Amanda Morgan** (Page 15); **David Y. Lee for PWF and the Fortune Society** (Cover; Pages 5, 10, 11, 17, 20, 21, 24, 29)



# CONTRIBUTORS

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JOHN JAY COLLEGE  
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

John Jay College of Criminal Justice of The City University of New York is a liberal arts college dedicated to education, research and service in the fields of criminal justice, fire science and related areas of public safety and public service. It strives to endow students with the skills of critical thinking

and effective communication; the perspective and moral judgment that result from liberal studies; the capacity for personal and social growth and creative problem solving that results from the ability to acquire and evaluate information; the ability to navigate advanced technological systems; and the awareness of the diverse cultural, historical, economic and political forces that shape our society.

The Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice works to spur innovation and improve practice in the field of reentry by advancing knowledge; translating research into effective policy and service delivery; and fostering effective partnerships between criminal justice and non-criminal justice disciplines. To achieve this mission, PRI develops, manages, and evaluates innovative reentry projects; provides practitioners and policymakers with cutting edge tools and expertise; promotes education opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals as a vehicle for successful reentry and reintegration; and creates synergy across fields and disciplines.

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The Fortune Society  
BUILDING PEOPLE, NOT PRISONS

The Fortune Society is a nonprofit social service and advocacy organization, founded in 1967, whose mission is to support successful reentry from prison and promote alternatives to incarceration, thus strengthening the fabric

of our communities. Fortune works to create a world where all who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated can become positive, contributing members of society. We do this through a holistic, one-stop model of service provision that is based on more than forty years of experience working with people with criminal records.

In 2007, The Fortune Society launched the David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy (DRCPP). While Fortune has always engaged in advocacy and community education, DRCPP is focused on the coordination of Fortune's policy development, advocacy, technical assistance, training, and community education efforts. DRCPP integrates Fortune's internal expertise – the life experience of our formerly incarcerated staff and clients and our first-hand experience as a longstanding direct service provider.

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The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR) is committed to developing knowledge and practice to promote constructive conflict resolution, effective cooperation, and social justice. Based at Teachers College, Columbia University, the center was founded in 1986 under the direction of Professor Emeritus Morton Deutsch, one of the world's most respected scholars of conflict resolution. The ICCCR's

mission is grounded in education: to support individuals, communities and organizations in better understanding the nature of conflict and in developing skills and settings to help them resolve conflict effectively. In addition, the Center's pedagogy is based in research and theory; applied research, including participatory action research, directly links the creation of knowledge with its application to issues of social justice.

As part of the Center's commitment to linking research and practice, researchers from the ICCCR partnered with Fortune and PRI to provide scholarly and research support in producing this toolkit. ICCCR researchers performed literature reviews, conducted interviews, analyzed data and wrote various sections of this toolkit.

## ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit addresses several interrelated issues regarding the successful reentry into society of formerly incarcerated men and women. First, there is a reentry crisis of unparalleled proportion currently facing communities in the United States. Because incarceration both profoundly impacts those who experience it and disproportionately affects low-income people of color, the response to it needs to be culturally competent across a spectrum of issues.

Second, there is an important employment component to individuals' reentry experience. While stable employment is critical to the successful reintegration into society of those returning home, the formerly incarcerated nonetheless confront significant barriers to employment, including discrimination based on their conviction records.

Finally – and this is the core of this toolkit – one way to address both of these issues is to build “cultural competence” within reentry services by hiring formerly incarcerated men and women to reflect the experiences and realities of the reentry population and provide services more effectively.



**The Fortune Society**  
*BUILDING PEOPLE, NOT PRISONS*