



A Center of the Public Health Institute

## Growing a Learning Organization

Aspen Baker, Executive Director

Exhale – Oakland, CA

Aspen described what Exhale was like in 2006. “We definitely had some big issues. Looking back, when we started in the ODS program in 2006, we had just launched the national multilingual talkline in 2005 and in 2007, I took a sabbatical. It was tough because we had some staffing and board issues. Around that time, our co-founder quit and we placed a job ad for a talkline coordinator within days of announcing the national launch. We went through a hiring process, but we were not able to find someone with a real connection to the organization.” Aspen added, “When I started the ODS program, I felt very limited in terms of my time.”

Aspen reflected on the value of the executive director retreat. “I remember being at the retreat and feeling like I was drowning in the issues of supervision, growth, and personnel management. Every element of the organization was living in me. I struggled with how to put institutional knowledge into the organization.” Aspen connected with a fellow executive director and received valuable guidance. “I remember talking to Rob Gitin [Executive Director of At the Crossroads] and got coaching from him on how to work with employees, for example tips for hiring and firing.”

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When asked why she and her organization gravitated toward enhancing their organizational learning and evaluation capacity, Aspen commented, “There had always been an innate learning style. For example, as staff we always went over evaluations from the talkline volunteer trainings and looked at what worked and what were the pieces of critical feedback. Then we would write out recommendations and implement them for next time.”

Aspen said she could trace her affinity for continuous quality improvement back to some of her earliest jobs in the food industry. She said, “It’s all about making the customer happy. In some ways, I learned more about quality

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improvement from restaurant owners than I learned from many nonprofit professionals.” Aspen also felt compelled to ensure that Exhale’s work was of the highest quality. She knew that because of the nature of their work and the uniqueness of their constituency, Exhale’s work would constantly be under scrutiny. “You can take issue with our mission, but not the quality of our work. I knew high quality work would be seen and respected.”

Aspen shared what changed for her as a leader during her year of participation in the ODS program. “One thing I learned about myself is that I really like to learn from other people. It’s important to find people who have a broad perspective and know what’s common in the sector. The one-on-one technical support was very helpful in that respect. I could talk about what I was experiencing and bounce ideas off someone who really engaged with me and the problem-

solving, thought strategically and had an investment in my leadership. I got to have a lot of conversations that were incredibly valuable. That kind of relationship cannot be valued enough. I would call it support with strategic ideas.”

ODS participants also received mini-grants to augment their technical support. According to Aspen, “The mini-grant gave us a head start on doing what we wanted with [our evaluation consultants]. When we got to end of what we could do with the mini-grant funding, [our consultant] came up with the idea to write a paper on exploring the concept of Exhale’s potential impact on the culture of abortion and how it is viewed. That paper has been significant for Exhale in building strategic relationships with other leaders and funders. People see us as more than just a service organization. Now we are in conversations with them about how to take it a step further. That conversation continues and it makes me feel like I have the right kind of people, or brain trust, around.”

In reflecting on how the ODS program changed her organization, Aspen said, “I always knew that our organization valued learning, but I discovered through the ODS program that there was such a thing as a *learning organization*. I realized that this was part of a model and an approach. Now we don’t have to think about being a learning organization anymore. It’s just how we do business.” That ability to do business as a learning organization is successful because Aspen has instilled the value of being a learning organization in her staff. Aspen reflected on how her staff have embraced being part of a learning organization. “Kristen holds the culture like I do. I see her doing the learning part of it. For example, she created an online survey and sent that out on her own.” When asked *how* Aspen passed on the value of being a learning organization, Aspen attributed some of it to her staff members’ own fulfillment in doing quality work, but also to the time she has taken to mentor her staff. “I have taken the time to teach what it means to be a learning organization.” Aspen reflected on what made the ODS program so unique and successful. “The learning and evaluation piece is what’s different and not seen anywhere else. It really worked for a lot of different organizations and leaders.”

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