Assuring Quality in Supported Employment

Dennis Sandow, Larry Rhodes, David M. Mank, Kenneth D. Ramsing, William F. Lynch

Supported employment has evolved from federally-funded demonstrations to state-regulated services for people with severe disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to examine one quality assurance method that promotes quality of supported employment through voluntary standards. In doing so, contemporary management and quality assurance systems are related to supported employment. To be of use in a rapidly evolving program such as supported employment, the approach to quality prescribed within this paper builds upon a foundation of constant improvement and community leadership.

As supported employment* extends beyond early demonstrations of success to widespread implementation, concerned stakeholders will be developing procedures to support and improve its quality (Wehman & Moon, 1989; Mank, Buckley, & Rhodes, in press). In doing so, everyone from state managers to program executives and their boards of directors will have opportunities to improve the outcomes and lifestyle changes experienced by people with severe disabilities served in local communities.

Historically, social service systems have addressed the measurement of service quality by establishing monitoring systems or minimum standards. Standards have most often taken the form of checklists or regulations developed and imposed by funders or other external agents. While useful for establishing minimally acceptable standards or threshold requirements, such monitoring systems are less likely to support ongoing improvement in individual outcomes over time, because standards focus almost exclusively on processes rather than outcomes of service.

Minimum standards are even less reliable as guardians of values. The supported-employment initiative seeks to provide meaningful employment to persons judged previously to be unemployable. It requires, according to the Minnesota Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities (1987), "a new way of thinking" about people with developmental disabilities. The concept of supported employment encompasses the belief that work should promote the dignity of an individual and enhance his or her role as a full participant in society. It proclaims the employment potential of people with severe disabilities and their rights to support services to the extent necessary. In addition, supported employment asserts that people with disabilities can make their greatest contributions and receive maximum benefits in integrated workplaces.

Given these values and the focus of supported employment on individual outcomes rather than on service processes, it is necessary to re-think how to use quality assurance systems to improve supported-employment services. One way is to borrow from the fields of management and quality assurance in industry. This paper suggests steps from recent quality assurance and management literature that may be important in enhancing quality in supported-employment service. This paper argues that these steps move beyond the conventional human-service approach of regulatory checklists and minimum standards because they foster continuous self-management and self-improvement.

The steps discussed in this paper help to give a structure for the development of quality assurance that becomes the foundation for meaningful supported employment. The steps are:

1. Expand the involvement of the local community.
2. Establish a clear mission or purpose.
3. Identify and stratify the accomplishments of the mission.
4. Stratify accomplishments into key processes.
5. Define measures.
6. Create useful information.
7. Use the information to take action.

Expand the involvement of the local community

The first step in managing supported-employment service is also the most fundamental. Community members with interests in significant employment outcomes for people with severe disabilities need to be identified and organized. Supported employment will not endure without community participation.

Human service organizations typically form organizational hierarchies early in their developments although the hierarchies are usually small-scale. Initial characteristics described by Milan Zeleny (1988) include "a system of institutional points of contact, informational filters, and "environmental scanning' artifacts." In supported employment, case management and mental health program administration function as institutional points of contact, while client progress statements and local versions of client activity reports function as informational filters. Potential resources, which could share supported-employment knowledge with the community, are absorbed into the segregated system of monitoring client services. The net result is an "impermeable system boundary," (Zeleny, 1988) which may well screen out environmental or community participation.

Community participation will be most effective if the interested parties maintain a single focus on the quality implementation of

**Supported employment is defined in this paper as the services and supports that are available in community employment settings to assist employees with and without disabilities in meeting their employment expectations.*

The authors wish to point out the distinction between these processes relating to supported employment and the outcome of supported employment, which is namely, paid work in integrated settings for people who require on-going support.

Dennis Sandow, B.S., is a Research Assistant at the Specialized Training Program, University of Oregon. His interests include economic evaluation of companies involved in supported employment, integration of employees with disabilities in supported employment, and quality assurance practices.

Larry Rhodes, Ph.D., is Senior Research Associate with the Specialized Training Program at the University of Oregon. He directs research and demonstration projects related to employment for people with severe disabilities.

David Mank, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Special Education and Rehabilitation at the University of Oregon. His primary areas of interest are integrated employment, self-management systems, and program improvement.

Kenneth Ramsing, Ph.D., is the Dean of the Graduate School and a professor of management at the University of Oregon. His area of specialty is in production management and operations research where he has published extensively in professional journals, has contributed to five books and is co-author of a book on management science.

William Lynch, B.S., is a Research Assistant at the University of Oregon's Specialized Training Program. Previously, he served as director of communications for the Association for Retarded Citizens of Oregon.

supported employment. The composition of such a team should be diverse, as are the communities in which supported employment is implemented. Teams might consist of advocates, citizens with disabilities, business leaders, educators and rehabilitation professionals. A worthy outcome of this first step in assuring quality is the formation of a defined community group dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with disabilities through supported employment.

Described here as a first step, community involvement must always be present. Using Zeleny's (1988) concept of knowledge emerging as a commodity in the information age, an open support organization will allow pertinent information to flow between the organization and the community, as well as throughout the support organization itself. Organizational planning will be significantly affected. Instead of producing plans with direct human service resources in isolation from the community, the organization will plan in the new environment consisting of the community at large. The right form for the new environment, according to Hessel, Mooney, and Zeleny (1988), is planning as "expansion flexibility" (i.e., the ability to cope with an even larger variety of future states). It is not difficult to envision the larger variety of future states of supported employment as current demonstrations continue to achieve new levels of excellence.

Establish a clear purpose or mission

The mission is the ultimate objective of managing an organization and will help direct decisions in the planning, implementation and maintenance phases. Establishing a mission is distinctly different from defining time-limited objectives, because a mission is not immediately attainable. Instead, it serves as a constant target for organizational performance. The mission defines the primary recipients of supported employment. It may be helpful during this process to "identify the customer needs and expectations and translate the needs and expectations into required characteristics of service" (Kacker, 1988). In this process two features are very important: (1) the dominant values of the community resources responsible for managing service and (2) the commitment to using a service technology that best fits those values.

The values of the community leaders interested in supported employment may not always be clear. Thus, an important first step in defining the mission is to clarify values. Values related to supported employment for people with severe developmental disabilities should, at the very least, include: (1) freedom of choice, (2) economic security, (3) rich social networks, (4) no exclusion from service due to the severity or type of disability, and (5) the same dignity and respect that is extended to adults in the community who do not have disabilities. In their commitment to use a service technology, managers of community supported-employment services address one of the barriers to quality service that is frequently encountered by not-for-profit organizations. Schmid, Dodd, and Tropman (1987) report that an indeterminate technology can be a significant barrier in the decision-making process for Boards of Directors. This means that although the Board of Directors assumes top-level management of a human service organization, it does not identify a tested service technology to accomplish its mission. Instead the technology is indeterminate, or not defined. For more than two decades a clearly defined direct-service technology has proven effective in training and supervising individuals with severe and profound retardation for work (Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Gaylord-Ross, 1988; Wehman, 1979; McLoughlin, Garner, & Callahan, 1987). Important features of such direct-service technologies have included: (1) responsibility of the service provider for individual performance, and, thus, (2) the use of the least restrictive approach to training and support, as well as (3) a focus on outcomes that over time lead to a specific accomplishment. This technology has used direct service processes drawn from applied behavior analysis including job analysis, task analysis, fading, shaping and feedback, which is based upon support and reinforcement for improved work performance.

The combination of values and service technology results in the mission. The features are interdependent. Without the values base, management will not sustain improvement supported-employment service and, therefore, will abandon the commitment to quality, which must be ever-present. Without a concurrent commitment to use a service technology, management will give lip service to its values. This can result in poor performance and seemingly insurmountable problems associated with implementation.

The mission serves as a long-range target for organizational direction and performance. According to Deming (1982), it provides a constancy of purpose for improving service. The constant improvement of supported employment is the only process that will lead to improved quality of life for clients over years and accomplishment of the organization's mission. For Deming, constancy of purpose implies that the Board of Directors and Executive Director are obliged to pursue innovation, including new services that help people to live better; put resources into research and education, and constantly upgrade service design to improve individual outcomes.

The mission of the organization should be developed and supported by all the employees and board members. A good mission is one that all staff and board members accept, are responsible for, and can easily cite. Sharing in the creation of a mission and subsequently delivering the service by which the mission is realized are fundamental to pride of workmanship and intrinsically reinforcing. This is important not only because financial benefits for employees in supported employment are low, but because the pride of work becomes a human dimension of quality (Alexander, 1988). Alexander describes this as "quality in the lives of the people who make the product and provide the service; without it there will not be quality in the products and the services they provide."

Progress on achieving the mission should be reviewed regularly through the use of the quality assurance techniques discussed further in this paper. At weekly staff and monthly meetings of the Board of Directors, commitment should be reaffirmed to the mission by a review of recent accomplishments and development of responses to timely information.

Identify and stratify the accomplishments of the mission

Historically, we have tried to maintain quality in human service by measuring processes. The assumption is that if processes or behaviors are in place, service quality also will be present. Gilbert (1978) suggests that process is important to consider, but only as secondary to actual accomplishments (such as wages or relationships with co-workers). Accomplishments are important because they reflect behavior and performance. The distinction that Gilbert

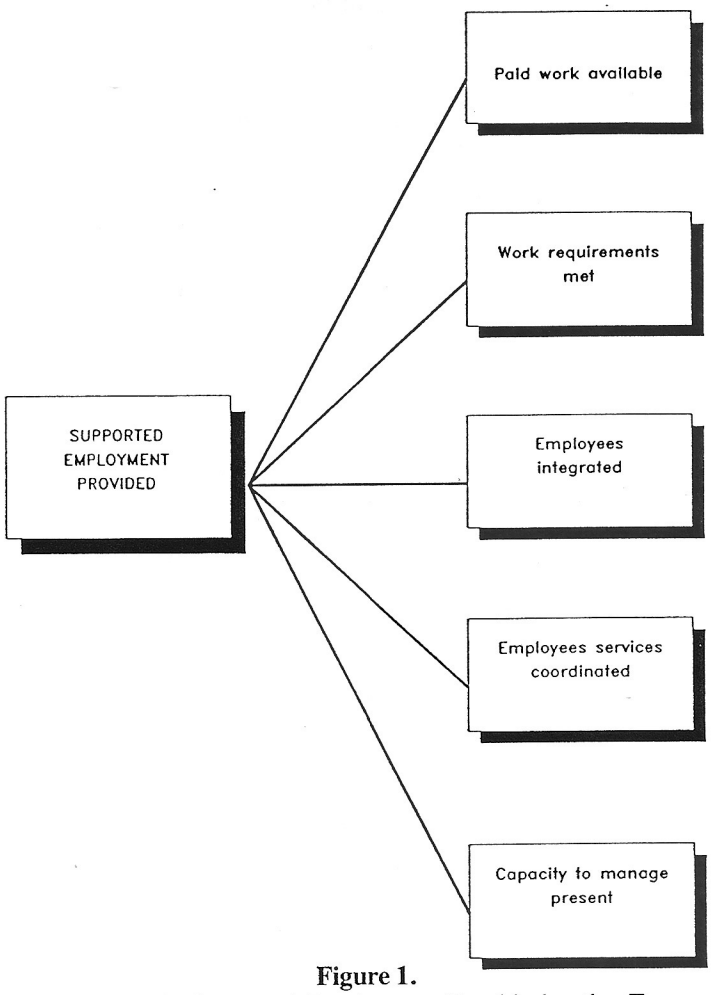

Figure 1.
Portion of a Supported-Employment Troubleshooting Tree

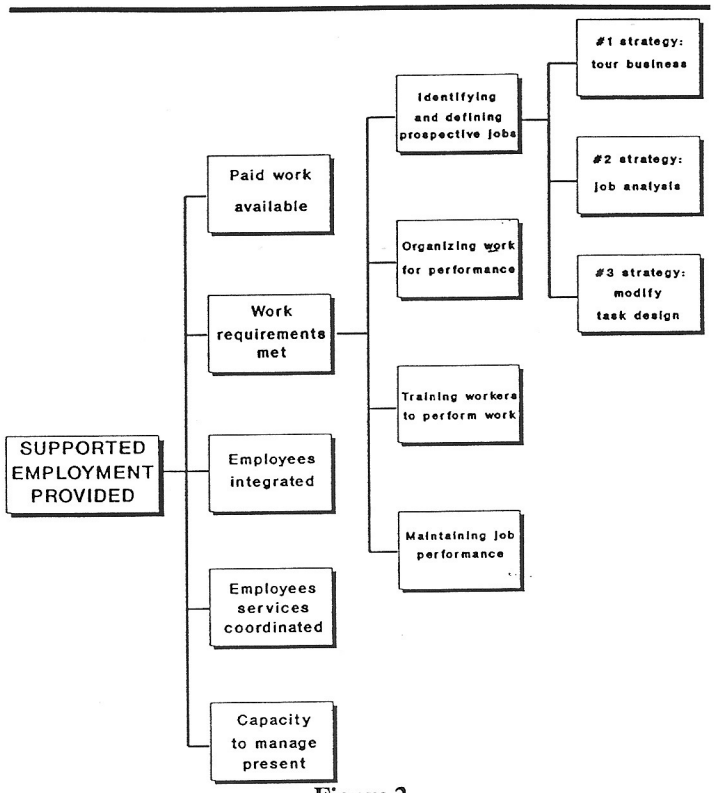

Figure 2.
Troubleshooting Tree

makes between behavior and accomplishment is that between the seller and the sale.

At a management level, the accomplishment of the mission may sound easy: "Provide supported employment." Job coaches may believe that Board members have lost touch (or had never been in touch) with services when they voice frustration during Board meetings about the number of individuals being served. The Board concurrently may feel that job coaches do not understand the total complexity of managing the organization. This "too much/too little" knowledge problem can alienate members of an organization. Board members may trivialize the detailed information critical to the job coach, which is "too much," when considered with the operating the total agency. For the Board, the relevant information is that which represents the total agency. Job coaches may wish to affect the whole organization with a narrow piece of information that comes from their efforts. In this case a job coach has "too little" knowledge with which to adequately serve the organization. Brethower (1982), Ishikawa (1976) and Gilbert (1978) integrate the information needs by stratifying the product, service, or, in this case, the mission into its component parts and constructing an information system to guide users to effective decision-making. The value of this approach to quality as opposed to a checklist of standards is clearly due to its utility to decision-makers. In the traditional standards approach, decision-makers' actions are compared to what might be considered "best practices," which can lead to dissatisfaction as decision-makers routinely try the "best practices" to no avail. In the quality-assurance approach described here, decision-makers are left with a troubleshooting "tree," a guide that directs them to solving problems affecting outcomes. A troubleshooting tree is a structural tool. It breaks the mission into its component steps, somewhat like a task analysis. A tree representing the mission of establishing supported employment is depicted in Figure 1 (Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank, & Albin, 1988). All major accomplishments are required to meet the mission of the supported-employment organization.

Stratify accomplishments into key processes

Quality planning requires that services satisfy customer needs and are provided efficiently (Kacker, 1988). Producing supported-employment services efficiently requires an organized and systematic process to detect errors, which, in turn, requires a definition of processes that will have the greatest effect on outcomes (Brache & Rummler, 1988).

This fourth step closely resembles the previous one. Major accomplishment areas are again broken into smaller sub-accomplishments. Figure 2 guides the user through the sub-accomplishment areas of "meeting work requirements." The utility of such a guide is its contribution to creativity. Rather than

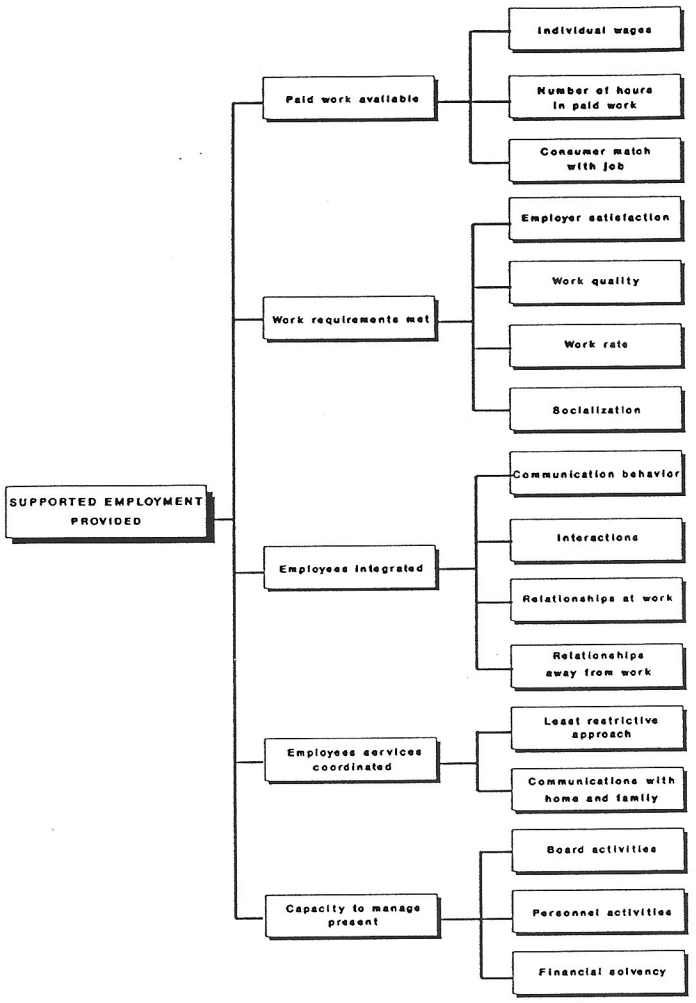

Figure 3.
Supported-Employment Measures

committing the users to a single approach to supported employment, participants are encouraged to continue to brainstorm the practice that results in desired outcomes. As the guide directs attention to accomplishment(s) that require improvement, resources are focused on brainstorming and problem-solving.

The sub-accomplishments of meeting work requirements in supported employment are key processes. They must be accomplished if the work performed is to satisfy the employer and the supported employee. These sub-accomplishments also can be broken down further into actual practices and procedures. For instance, Figure 2 shows that the sub-accomplishment for identifying prospective jobs may not be accomplished for a variety of reasons. In response, support staff members can adjust their practices until prospective jobs are identified. In Figure 2 the first strategy used for identifying jobs is to tour a business. The tour results in support staff feeling uncertain about supporting employees with disabilities on the job. In response to this uncertainty they conduct a job analysis. This requires that the support staff performs the job over an extended period of time in order to complete the job analysis. The completed job analysis results in information that increases the certainty that the employee with disabilities can perform the job with support. However, before the job can be trained, a third strategy, modifying the task, must occur. The approved task design completes the activity of identifying and defining prospective jobs.

As this process is completed for all major accomplishment areas, management and staff will now have a tool to tie the performance of support services to the major processes that are required in order to achieve the accomplishment. Problems in not meeting an accomplishment can then be traced directly to the process strategy requiring management attention.

Define measures

This fifth step can be very difficult. For example, providing access to paid work can be measured easily by the number of hours worked, wages paid, and length of time on the job. Social integration, however, is much more difficult to measure. Managers tend to quantify results, such as wages or hours worked, which is beneficial, but is not the only way to measure performance. Measures need not be restricted to those that lend themselves to data collection and subsequent information systems. Understanding can be gained through discussions, queries and stories about social integration in order to improve social integration support services. Holding this point of view may prove useful in creating an environment that values knowledge unconditionally and results in an increasing awareness of supported employment.

The measures that an organization defines should be useful to support staff as well as to board members. They should be retrievable for timely decision-making. Examples of measures for supported-employment sub-accomplishments are included in Figure 3.

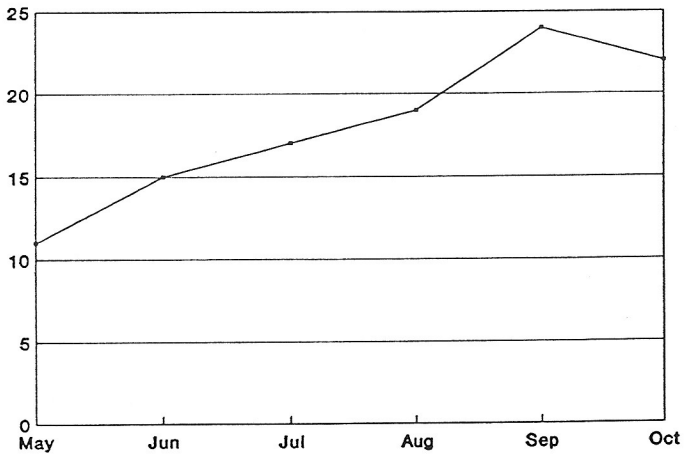

Figure 4.
Average Hours Worked Per Week

Create useful information

The sixth step is to translate data into information the managers of supported employment can use to make decisions. As both Deming (1938) and Ishikawa (1976) point out, the reason data are collected is to take action. Management is likely to frustrate employees if they are asked to collect data that are never used. Information need not be complex or sophisticated, but it must be current. When two data points are added together (i.e., hours in paid work) the result provides a simple, but useful, information tool. Support staff members gain a clear, objective view of the outcome of their performance over time. Other types of information tools can include line, bar or pie charts.

In Figure 4 the hours worked per week for one employee with disabilities is presented in a line graph. The graph in turn presents information including when the employee reached 20 hours per week of work (August) and the trend or progress of hours worked over a six-month period. Both pieces of information are important to support staff and the employee with disabilities.

In Figure 5 the amount of time on the job for all supported-employment participants is presented in the form of a pie graph and suggests that most employees have been on the job for more than one year. This graph is useful for planning the nature of future supported-employment services (i.e., initial training, stabilization or maintenance).

Social integration is more difficult to portray with the type of information tools shown above. The numbers of co-employees without disabilities in physical proximity and the number of social contacts might be measured numerically. But these certainly fall short of representing social integration in supported employment. Employees' stories of relationships and significant personal events can provide excellent information sources, however.

It is likely that managers of supported-employment services will continue to convert support data into useful information for job coaches, advocates, participating businesses and employees with disabilities. This is similar to attempts made in business to offer employees important information for their reaction. These information tools in industry have become even more decision-oriented. Control charts (Shewart, 1939; Deming, 1982; Ishikawa, 1976) allow production workers to decide whether or not their production process generates uniform results. The pareto diagram (Ishikawa, 1976) helps identify the most efficient strategy by ranking problems, defects or service failures, based upon their respective magnitudes or importance. These and other information tools cannot be described in the scope of this paper, but their utility to supported employment should be considered.

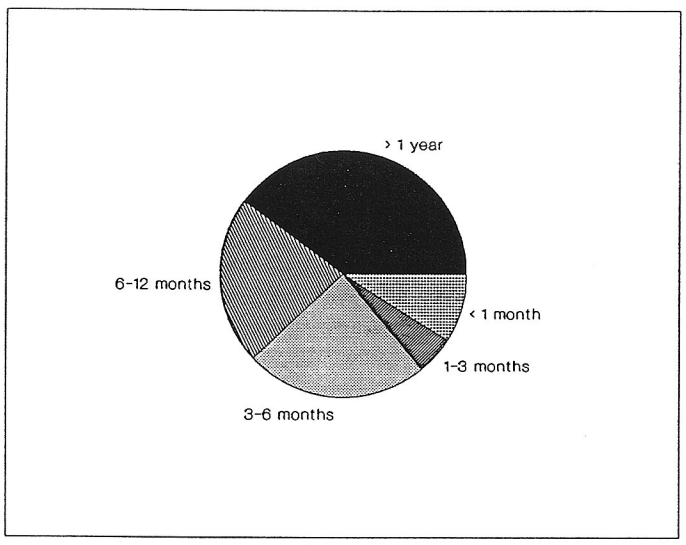

Figure 5.
Amount of Time on the Job

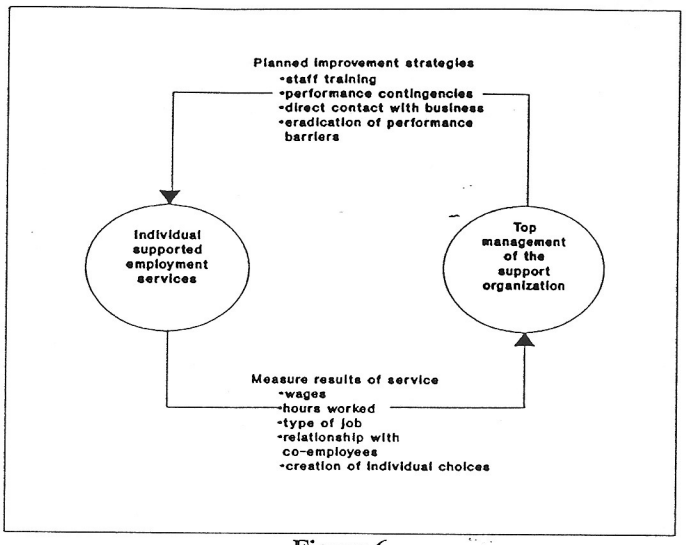

Figure 6.
Management Decision Loop for Service Improvement

Use the information to take action

The seventh step is to respond to the information to assure that there is a constant improvement of service. This requires that the information be reliably reported so that appropriate decisions can be made. The process should be ongoing, as depicted in the decision loop represented in Figure 6. In this way, management can compare current and past performance and respond accordingly. The regular use of the feedback loop results is one of Deming's (1982) points for top management to "constantly and forever improve the system of . . . service." Improvement processes like the feedback loop cannot be effective in situations where participants react defensively or with a defeatist attitude. This is not to criticize such reactions because top management has the responsibility of preventing fear from reprisal when new ideas fail. Fear, defensive reactions, and defeatism clearly violate rules of brainstorming and the spirit of improvement.

Summary

Supported employment for people with severe disabilities is progressing beyond policy demonstration to more widespread implementation. As this occurs, state and local administrators of

developmental disability resources will develop regulatory standards for service. The purpose of this paper has been to explore quality assurance procedures used in business. General features of these procedures include (1) building quality into service as opposed to inspection or monitoring, (2) increased employee (in this case, job coach) involvement in the definition of quality variables, (3) continual improvement, and (4) increased pride of workmanship through realization of organizational mission accomplishments.

The paper describes the implementation of a voluntary level of quality assurance, which supported-employment managers now find themselves addressing. For the most part this is because most states and county governments have not finalized administrative rules that will determine regulatory standards. Voluntary standards exceed regulatory standards and are managed by those participating in the continual improvement of outcomes. They rely exclusively upon the self-monitoring and self-management of those who provide the service.

The steps described here have focused on community service providers. The same steps should be used to improve the quality of supported employment at all levels of government and organization. Federal policymakers, state developmental disabilities service managers, university researchers, state supported-employment managers, regional and county mental retardation administrators, and local case managers must all participate in improving the quality of supported-employment outcomes. In this way we stand to drastically improve employment outcomes by firmly embedding steps for quality improvement at the core of supported employment for people with severe disabilities.

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