**Understanding Organizational Culture**

Finding the "right fit" between an activity professional's personal qualities and abilities and the dynamics of an organization can impact the success of a program. Many activity professionals work in several settings before finding this right match. Determining the skills and personality traits needed within an organization is a very specific and vital process. It helps the current activity professional develop effective strategies to be more successful, it helps the activity professional that is job searching and it improves the success of finding the right person when hiring.

What specific traits are needed for success in YOUR organization? Examples include traits such as: assertiveness, flexibility, initiative, decisiveness, high energy, collaboration, planning and organization, resourcefulness, high stress tolerance or good interpersonal skills.

The task of understanding individual characteristics of health care facilities is well documented in management literature. Nursing home administration references, nursing manuals and social work administrative texts all discuss the difficult-to-compare differences of health care communities. The process of understanding organizational culture is sometimes called "environmental reconnaissance." It involves determining the social climate and general "feel" of the organization. Specifically understanding each of the following is imperative:

> The mission and goals of the organization
> The philosophy, the values and the beliefs of the organization
> The organization's role in the community (facility names and marketing slogans)
> The structure (chain of command) and policies of the organization
> The historical development of the organization (traditional approach to service or change-oriented)
> The values, routines and preferences of the residents that are served
> The philosophy and values of the workforce that delivers care
> The style of management and supervision
> The regulatory bodies that oversee the operations

After discovering the culture of the organization, the activity professional can focus on positive strategies to promote a productive work environment. These strategies focus on the following:

1. Incorporate the mission and goals of the organization into event and program planning. Implement programs that will reinforce the role in the community.
2. Develop goals for the program with the administrative team. Prepare your goals, next ask for expectations for the program from others. The following are expectations that an administrator/executive director shared with the activity professional at a recent workshop:
   a. Delivery of more individualized person-centered activities
   b. An organized program to serve cognitively impaired persons
   c. Creative techniques to involve staff
   d. Networking and volunteer resource development

3. List the "critical success factors, " the top priority tasks that MUST be done to succeed in the job within this organization. Frequent examples include:
    a. Timely and accurate assessments, care plan and progress notes
    b. Creative calendar design and production
    c. Attendance at assigned meetings
    d. Specific design of holiday and seasonal decorations
    e. Implementation of planned events
    f. Development of staff support and training
4. Keep the management informed of the status and progress of high priority areas and steps towards goals.
5. Communicate in the style and preference of the listener; the person receiving the information.
    a. Identify the preferred method of communication, such as, written memos, email, verbal discussion at meetings, voice mail or text message.
    b. Respond in the preferred "language" of the listener, such as including facts and figures, addressing the impact of image in the community, targeting compliance issues or the impact on resident and family involvement.
    c. When preparing written memos be specific. Do not include words such as soon, several, when convenient, or ASAP. Give a time frame. (At a recent meeting ASAP meant within 5 minutes to one participant and within 2 weeks to another!) Include factual information in memos, not the discussion of issues.
6. Listen to the suggestions from others without evaluation. Follow up on suggestions with a detailed, written plan. Include the time required for the tasks and the support that will be required for success. Clarify the tools that will be necessary to get the job done. Share this with others.
7. Gather data prior to discussing issues or problems. Be specific and delineate the scope of the problem. Have solutions prepared and a plan to follow.

Understanding the specific "culture" or "character" of your organization can lead to improved relationships, communication and collaboration. Success depends on developing specific strategies within each organization.