

Hiring Consultants to Support Your Wraparound Project

The Decision to Seek Professional Advice or Information

By Patricia Miles

Introduction: Wraparound is a complex set of actions, steps and techniques that are linked together to create a powerful planning process designed to assist children and families with living quality lives in their own communities. Sponsors, managers, project staff and collaborative partners can often experience challenge in Wraparound implementation. Opportunities to network with peers who are also implementing Wraparound projects has never been greater with a wide range of resources available including web-based resources, defined projects, frequent state level information resources as well as local, state and national conferences.

This peer interaction offers many advantages including the opportunity for sharing new insights, techniques or implementation strategies as well as creating an opportunity to give and take about fresh lessons learned. On the other hand, it is not unusual for many leadership of many Wraparound projects to find that they have a need for professional consultation in bringing their Wraparound project up to full implementation.

In the past, Wraparound projects had to rely on word of mouth in order to find someone with enough history and enough distance to provide the type of information, support, training and problem-solving needed to ease implementation. Because of increased exposure and many first and second generation projects, the availability of consultants, experts and helpers with direct Wraparound experience has grown significantly, making it easier for projects to select the right mix of experience, skills and talent to meet their unique implementation needs.

Steps for Choosing a Wraparound Consultant

Step One: Identify your objectives: The first step in developing a successful relationship with a consultant is for the project to identify its aims or goals. A common mistake for projects experiencing significant implementation challenges is to skip this step and assume the consultant will be able to “fix” the problems you are experiencing. The consultant should not be the only voice in articulating the project problems but instead project leadership should begin to articulate results of the consultation.

Step Two: Identify Your Audience: Wraparound projects, by definition, involve a range of people with a range of roles getting together to design and develop imaginative and creative plans. The range of people and roles who may be involved in Wraparound implementation include project staff, project supervisors, family members, community members, people in existing staff roles such as clinicians, child welfare workers, probation officers, teachers and children or youth involved in the project. It is important for project staff to identify who the primary audience is that the Wraparound consultant should reach. Efforts should be made to find a consultant who is a likely match for the target audience of terms of expertise, style and personality.

Step Three: Identify your preferred consulting method: Consultants have a variety of approaches to offer a Wraparound project. It is important that the project identify what type of approach is best suited to their needs. Listed below are three methods that consultants often use in working with a local project to achieve their goals.

- *Information Consultant:* This method involves using a consultant to provide expertise, information and professional advice designed to help the project. Typically, if your need is for information, activities may primarily center around formal training activities or materials development that can be disseminated to various stakeholders. When seeking an information consultant the project should consider the following areas:
 - What is the consultant's expertise in the area of need?
 - How much credibility will the consultant have in this area with your local audience? What can you/consultant do to assure credibility?
 - What is the best method for us to communicate this information? Training sessions? Written materials?
 - Are there any barriers in our project that keep this information from being shared now?
 - How long do we expect this to take? Are we being realistic with my expectations?

- *Process Consultant:* If your project seems to have access to the right information but tends to get mired down in details or experiences inertia, a Process based consultant can be helpful. Projects that need a Process Consultant usually have a good grasp of information but they feel a need for someone who has enough distance from their local implementation to provide local implementors with the information and insight they need to get moving in the right direction. When selecting a Process Consultant the project should consider the following areas:
 - Is the consultant able to consider a range of implementation strategies?
 - Can the consultant articulate a variety of strategies for implementation?
 - Is the consultant able to grasp major themes or your big picture by analyzing the details of your implementation, local system and local community?
 - Will this consultant be able to summarize these themes to our local project in a way that moves us ahead in what we're hoping to achieve?
 - How long do we expect this to take? Are we being realistic with my expectations?

- *Relationship Consultant:* Some projects find their needs are best met by hiring an outsider to work with their project over time. A Consultant in this role will work with a project over time providing feedback, strategic problem solving and situation specific advice and strategies as they come up. A project that elects to use a relationship based consulting process is typically looking for someone who can sustain a longer term relationship with the project. When selecting a Relationship Based Consultant the project should consider the following areas:
 - Is this person someone who we could imagine working with over time?
 - Is the consultant able to review our local implementation and make

- suggestions that are appropriate to our local situation?
- Do we feel comfortable with the consultant's base of knowledge?
 - Do we feel comfortable that the consultant is able to gather information about our process?
 - Is the consultant more interested in our project or Wraparound implementation?
 - How long do we expect this to take? Are we being realistic with my expectations?

Wraparound projects that are interested in pursuing consultation may consider what methods would most fit their local needs and strengths. Some projects may find individuals that will fit all three of the methods described above while other projects may find that they want to use different individuals to fit each of these methods.

Step Four: Begin the Consultation Process: When your project has matched the target audience with the consulting method, it is time to begin a consultation process. In some cases, this might entail trying a range of individuals before making a longer term commitment. In other cases, initial interviews and getting references is enough to get started with consultation. In hiring a consultant, it is important that the project identify the results they are hoping for from each consultation session. This allows the consultant and the project to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation.

Step Five: Modify & Adjust: Hiring the consultant is only the beginning. The successful consultation process involves an interchange between the client and consultant. Objectives should be outlined and agreed upon by both parties. Over time accomplishment of those outcomes should be reviewed to determine whether the strategies used should be adjusted, maintained or simply stopped.

Some Tips for Selecting A Consultant

- ! **Beware the Expert View:** In searching for the ultimate answer you are likely to find it won't work in your community anyway.
- ! **Relationships Count:** It is important to find someone who can make you feel comfortable in the consultation process.
- ! **Get References:** Don't be afraid to ask others for their view of the consultant's approach. It is often a good idea to ask those people on the consultant's reference list if they can suggest anyone else for you to contact.
- ! **Solicit Samples:** Ask the Consultant to provide sample of other work and review it to determine compatibility with your project's needs. Samples can include published materials, reports or training materials.
- ! **Follow Your Instincts:** Sometimes the final decision to selecting a consultant comes down to trusting your basic feelings about the person, skills, personality and attributes.
- ! **Create Your Back Door:** It is important to identify strategies for the consultation to end even as the consultation begins. This will increase the likelihood that your project will use consultation in the right way for the right purpose for the right duration for the right price.
- ! **Find Someone Who is Interested in You:** Consultation is an interactive process that occurs between at least two parties. This is what makes it different than simply identifying a training event. The consultant should take the time to learn about you, your project and your local community.
- ! **Level with Your Consultant:** A successful relationship between a Consultant and their client will be based on candor and mutual honesty.
- ! **Remember It's an Equal Partnership:** A successful consulting is as much the responsibility of the client as the consultant.
- ! **Set Your Benchmarks:** Productive consultation will identify mileposts for accomplishment and review progress towards outcomes regularly. This allows the client and consultant to adjust strategies for more effectiveness.
- ! **Modify Your Plan:** As you begin the consultation process you are apt to find new insights, opportunities and challenges. It is important that you continually review your implementation to determine where mid-course adjustments should be made.