

Choosing a Consultant to Support Your Wraparound Project by Pat Miles and other NWI advisors

Implementing wraparound in a community is complex and difficult. At the service level, successful implementation of wraparound requires that key team members—team facilitators, parent partners, resource developers, and others—acquire skills and expertise that will enable them to collaborate with families to build plans that are individualized, culturally competent, and community- and strengths-based. Successful implementation also requires changes in the wider organizational and systems context within which wraparound teams operate. The agencies and organizations that participate in wraparound must learn new ways to work together, sharing authority, responsibility, and resources.

Because wraparound implementation is so complex, sponsors, managers, project staff, and collaborative partners often seek advice and assistance from experienced colleagues and other consultants. Opportunities to network with peers have never been greater, with a wide range of supports available including web-based resources, state-level information and technical assistance, and local, state, and national conferences. This peer interaction offers many advantages including the opportunity for sharing new insights, techniques, or implementation strategies, and the opportunity for mutual sharing about fresh lessons learned.

At the same time, it is not unusual for leaders in Wraparound projects to find that they need professional consultation as they move toward full implementation. In the past, Wraparound projects had to rely on word of mouth in order to find consultants with high levels of expertise. However, as Wraparound has become more widely implemented, 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.

But how exactly should stakeholders proceed once they have decided to seek consultation for their Wraparound project? What steps can they take to ensure that they are investing wisely and getting the type of information and support they need?

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that a consultant will not solve your problems or fix your system. Do not expect or allow the consultant to manage your staff for you. You must provide leadership for your project, and there must be a committed group of active stakeholders within your own project who are continually expanding their own knowledge and expertise. Thus, these people are in a position to make best use of the knowledge the consultant brings, and to help structure the kinds of learning experiences that are needed by other people involved in the local implementation.

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 they are experiencing. The consultant should not be the only voice in articulating the project problems but instead project leadership should be clear about the desired 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, and teachers; and children or youth involved in the project. It is important for project staff to identify primary audience(s) 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 four methods that consultants often use in working with a local project to achieve their goals.
 - *Information Consultation:* 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 will primarily center on formal training activities or the development of materials 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 project personnel and/or the consultant do to assure credibility?
 - What is the best method for us to communicate this information? Training sessions? Written materials?
 - Does the consultant understand the need to provide information in a variety of modes, so that people with different learning styles can benefit from consultation?
 - Does the consultant have a well-developed sense of the structures and strategies that are likely to be helpful to adult learners?
 - Are there any barriers in the project that keep us from developing or sharing this information now?

- How long is this expected to take? Are our expectations realistic?
- Coaching. When a project feels a need to help people in key roles develop their skill and expertise in particular aspects of Wraparound, they may employ a consultant to serve as a coach. Coaching is usually fairly intensive, and involves an opportunity for the coach to observe, as closely as possible, the current skill level of the person being coached. The coach offers techniques, tools, strategies, and other supports that will help the person achieve a higher level of expertise. A coach will often demonstrate new skills and techniques in “real life” situations. Coaches often work with a project over time, offering new supports and insights appropriate to people’s increasing level of skill and experience. Coaches may also work with supervisors to help expand local coaching capacity. When seeking coaching, the project may want to consider:
 - Does the coach have a high level of expertise in the skills needed by our identified key project personnel?
 - Does the coach have a well-developed sense of the structures and strategies that are likely to be helpful to adult learners?
 - Is the coach able to relate to adult learners in ways that inspire them and increase their confidence?
 - Does the coach have a variety of tools and resources to offer as supports to the coaching process?
- *Process Consultation*: If a project seems to have access to the right information but still seems to have difficulty making headway, a process-based consultant can be helpful. Projects that need a process consultant usually have a good sense of what they want to accomplish, but experience difficulty actually doing it. They may have a need for someone who has some distance from their local project and who can provide information and insight they need to get “unstuck”. 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 the “big picture” by analyzing the details of our implementation, local system, and local community?
 - Will this consultant be able to summarize these themes to us in a way that moves the project towards its goals?
 - How long will this take? Are we being realistic with expectations?
- *Relationship-based Consultation*. 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 needs arise. 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 whom 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?
- How long do we expect this to take? Are we being realistic with our 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. Projects may also find it useful to use several consultants with expertise in different aspects of implementation.

- *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, in writing, 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. Feedback on the consultant's activities should also be systematically sought from those who participated.
- *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:** If you search for the ultimate answer you are likely to find that 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. Ask whether the consultant has delivered promised services and materials, and delivered on schedule. 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. Be sure to find out if the reference has current knowledge about the consultant.
- **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. Ask the consultant who wrote the materials—inexperienced trainers may be using materials developed by other with a higher level of expertise.
- **Follow Your Instincts:** Sometimes the final decision to selecting a consultant comes down to trusting your basic feelings about the person and their skills, personality, and attributes.
- **Be Clear About Expectations:** Establish a contract with clear expectations for the work you expect your consultant. This should explicitly describe the activities to be carried out, the materials to be produced, the timeline to be followed, and the outcomes by which the consultant's efforts will be evaluated.
- **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, and 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. The consultant should not only listen to you, but also reflect back to you that he or she has heard and understands what you are saying. You should be confident that the consultant is capable of modifying or adapting the consultation to fit your local situation and needs.
- **Strive for consistency:** If you use multiple consultants, work with them to ensure that they are not sending mixed or contradictory messages to program staff and stakeholders. The same values and approaches can be conveyed in different formats and people can become confused or even conflicted about which approach to use.
- **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:** 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 greater effectiveness.
- **Plan for Follow-up:** Work with the consultant to decide how your program should follow up from consulting sessions, and whether the consultant will provide follow-up technical assistance or other forms of support.
- **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.