CEO – a Constituent Voice case study

Background

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) provides employment services to people with recent criminal convictions. It prepares and supports them to find a job and stay connected to the labor force. CEO operates a four step process; job readiness training, transitional job training, permanent job placement, and post placement retention incentives. In the last 10 years, CEO has placed nearly 25,000 formerly incarcerated people in full-time, unsubsidized employment. It has more than 4,500 people enrolled in the program annually. CEO operates in New York, California, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania, with plans to expand significantly over the next five years.

Problem

CEO is a data driven organization but senior management realised that the views of program participants were a missing data point. If there had been a major customer service issue, management did not have a formal mechanism in place to know about it. They believed if they started collecting this data it would help them achieve better outcomes for the target population.

> "*Organizations that want to be high performing need to take the temperature of their customers and we bought into the idea that ultimately feedback can help drive outcomes. And it can certainly drive quality.*" – Brad Dudding, Chief Operating Officer, CEO

Approach

CEO engaged Keystone Accountability to develop a feedback system in early 2012. Keystone used Constituent Voice™ (CV) methodology to assist CEO to design a feedback system, collect data, analyze the data, dialogue with participants and then course correct where needed.

CEO created this theory of change for the Constituent Voice project:
If CEO

- collects high quality feedback from participants consistently
- closes feedback loops through routine dialogue and inquiry
- and responds to feedback in a timely, flexible, and appropriate manner

Then

- participants will feel heard and their levels of trust in CEO with strengthen
- participant levels of program engagement will rise
- participant vocational outcomes will increase

CEO and Keystone Accountability tested different parts of the Constituent Voice model for a year in New York City, and then on the basis of that experience, designed a pilot to run in New York City and San Bernardino, California in which participants would be asked for their views through a mobile phone survey. For participants with no phone, feedback was

solicited in face-to-face meetings, and later a tablet was available to allow participants to answer survey questions anonymously. The survey was sent out following meetings between participants and CEO job coaches and business account managers.

The questions included 'On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend CEO to a friend or family member?' which elicited a CV net performance score (NPS).[1]

CEO's CV in action:

- 6,500 texts sent
- 900 participants surveyed
- 55% response rate
- 85 participants attended a focus group

The results were immediately uploaded into a dashboard on Salesforce. Feedback was initially linked to participant profiles and this continuous stream of data allowed staff to address issues in real time. Later, feedback data became confidential, so staff were only provided access to the aggregated data set that showed common themes and concerns rather than to a named individual's feedback. The aim was to test whether the identified courtesy bias (see 'Turning high scores into low scores' below) could be mitigated with more psychological security to answer confidentially[2]. As well as conducting surveys CEO organized focus group discussions to get further information from participants about how services could improve.

Results

> "*The most useful part of CV has been the ability to go to participants and say, 'We care about hearing from you and we want to make a record of what you're saying. We can't guarantee changes will occur overnight, but we want to find ideas that are actionable and figure out ways to implement them.' Taking time to have this conversation and to ask these questions is an intervention in and of itself, and whether we can statistically acknowledge the effect yet or not, it's a worthwhile endeavor to at least ask and let our participants know we're committed to hearing from them.*" - Nathan Mandel, Outreach Specialist, CEO

Tangible changes: As a result of the feedback received from participants CEO made several changes to the program. These were reasonably quick wins, ways to demonstrate that benefit of CV to participants and staff. They are only representative of the first point in the theory of change – that participants feel heard. But may be the first step on the pathway to the other hypothesised changes; improved

[1] The net performance score works on a single question where respondents give a rating from 0-10. Those who answer 9 or 10 are considered promoters, passives give 7 or 8 and detractors give 0-6. Detractors are unhappy and could damage the organization through negative word of month. The net performance score is generated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters.

[2] This test is on-going and the results are not yet available.

participant engagement and outcomes.

The changes included:

- creating a map with local landmarks and subway stops to help new people find the program
- moving the start of the first major CEO activity, life skills training, from 7am to 8am
- participants wanted a direct line to contact their job coaches so all coaches now have a smartphone
- adding job descriptions to the list of work sites detailing the duties
- considering providing participants with metro cards after the initial one-week training and disseminating physical copies of the staff directory to provide participants with contact information

There are, of course, elements of the program that attracted negative feedback, which CEO is not able to change, including the rate of pay for transitional jobs.

> "*Pay is one of the hardest things for us to change. When addressing this feedback we focus on the message that CEO's goal is to place participants in a job with career growth and for people to make higher salaries in time*." – Nathan Mandel, Outreach Specialist, CEO

CEO staff are beginning to share positive stories of participants who are excited to have given feedback that makes it into the case notes.

"*People feel they are part of a change*." – Nathan Mandel, Outreach Specialist, CEO

Pilot expansion: CEO is expanding the CV pilot to include new questions delivered at different times and experimenting with making responses more confidential. This will run for a few months after which CEO will expand CV across its entire program.

The evolution of feedback: CEO plans to move beyond soliciting and acting on feedback and evolve into co-creating with participants. There are plans to involve participants in analyzing the data and assessing how CEO is doing. One of CEO's goals is to amplify participant voices and formalize their ability to weigh in on program policies and processes. Much like an

alumni network, CEO is considering establishing a participant advisory board that could collectively discuss modifications to CEO's program and suggest improvement.

> "*This was something we were not considering when we started but as it evolved we realised that we don't have enough places where we can include the voices and perspectives of participants. We are in the planning stage of cultivating alumni who have received value from CEO and can continue to counsel us on how we can improve the program and continue to engage participants*" – Brad Dudding, Chief Operating Officer, CEO

Soliciting feedback from other groups: CEO is expanding its CV practice to include soliciting feedback from other stakeholder groups – starting with employers (and possibly later including parole officers, and others). CEO is using Keystone's online benchmarking tool the Feedback Commons and reaching out to employers by email.

CEO will be promoting the Feedback Commons to similar organizations to create a 'neighbourhood' where experiences can be compared. The aim is to build a 'field' of similar organizations, all interested in collecting feedback and sharing best practice. As early adopters in this area CEO are ideally placed to grow this field.

> "*We like the idea of having a place where we can see what other people are doing and their response rates. It would be a good learning platform.*" – Brad Dudding, Chief Operating Officer, CEO.

Further reading

Keystone Accountability's website http://keystoneaccountability.org/
The Feedback Commons http://feedbackcommons.org/
CEO's website http://ceoworks.org/
An external evaluation of CEO's work http://ceoworks.org/resources/impacts/external-evaluation/
CEO's blog about CV https://talktousceo.wordpress.com/
A Markets for Good article on feedback in the non profit sector
https://marketsforgood.org/are-proxy-buyers-stunting-the-growth-of-the-nonprofit-economy/
'Feedback: a non profit learns to listen to its customer' by Marc Gunther on Non Profit Chronicles.com
https://nonprofitchronicles.com/2016/09/13/feedback-a-nonprofit-learns-to-listen-to-the-customer-but-whos-the-customer/

Turning high scores into low scores

In the first round of data CEO received very high scores – mostly 9s and 10s. They deduced that this was for various reasons – firstly, participants did appreciate the intervention but there was also significant courtesy bias. Through focus groups CEO discovered that people were unwilling to give low scores in case it affected their chances of getting a job or led to other negative consequences for themselves or their job coach.

> "*It's like back talking to your parent. How can I tell a [CEO staff member] they're wrong? It's like biting the hand that feeds you.*" – a CEO participant in a focus group

CEO's net performance score was 79 in phase one, 65 in phase two and 60 in phase three (in phase three the answers were confidential).

Changes to questions: CEO wanted questions that cut through this courtesy bias and people's desire to do what they think is right rather than what is honest. For the second round of questions CEO made some changes. Rather than focusing on getting people's opinion of how CEO was doing, the questions shifted to asking participants how they were doing. For example, in the first phase of the pilot questions asked participants to say whether their job coach encourages them and helps them to find a job. In the second phase, when the focus shifted away from CEO towards the participants themselves, it asks 'Do you have a role model who encourages you to find work?'.

In CEO's third pilot, they used questions that focused on how participants were doing in and outside of work, as well as how CEO can better work with them to help them attain their goals. Questions focused more on the overall process of finding employment. While the NPS question remained on a 0-10 scale, all other numerical questions used a 1-5 scale to make answering simpler. Other questions also asked for only a 'yes' or 'no' response.

Presenting the project to participants: The CV project was introduced during the initial one-week training that all participants attend when coming to CEO. During the meeting, CEO staff explained the importance of feedback and that they value honest feedback. Staff encouraged participants to open up in focus groups and to both solicit and provide feedback as a matter of course in all meetings they have with participants.

Anonymizing responses: Participants still answer SMS surveys on their phone but CEO limited staff's ability to access the data on an individual level. This means feedback is less personal. CEO has also introduced a tablet in its NYC office allowing participants to give totally anonymous feedback as they leave, or are waiting to be seen.

Taking feedback

Introducing a feedback system can be threatening to staff, who would receive personal feedback on their performance. Staff expressed concerns that this data would be examined and they would be evaluated on it, although that was not the intention.

> "*Rather than trying to persuade people to make time in their busy days to listen to feedback we wanted to change the mindset that hearing feedback is part of your job and it is necessary for you to do your job well. That ultimately is the only way it is going to work.*" – Brad Dudding, CEO

CEO conducted staff training, explaining the ways in which feedback is important. Specifically, feedback-seeking behavior - as it's called in the research literature - has been linked to higher job satisfaction, greater creativity on the job, faster adaptation in a new organization or role, and lower turnover. In fact, seeking out negative feedback has been associated with higher performance ratings.

Staff have slowly adopted the belief that CEO needs to improve and formalize its ability to hear from its participants. Staff have been encouraged to do real time exchange of feedback during case management sessions and document their findings. CEO continues to address the challenge of fostering a learning mindset and feedback-dependent culture.

> "*Our corporate culture is not feedback centred. There is an aspiration to make it more so. We were hoping this project would open the door for that too. We are exploring how asking feedback of your constituents can open the door to more effective feedback among co-workers, both peer-to-peer and up and down the management chain*." – Brad Dudding, Chief Operating Officer, CEO

Finding the right time to ask

To obtain meaningful net performance scores CEO decided to ask the question on its own after a key moment in the participant's experience at CEO. The 'moment of truth' represents a time when someone has a full view of the program and has formulated some ideas on what the program's strengths and weaknesses. The moments that are currently being tested are the first time they are sent to a job interview and the first time they are placed in a job.

> *"Before now net performance score was asked on a rotating basis. We were counselled that the net performance score question deserves an unfettered moment at a time when someone can really give an informed opinion*." – Brad Dudding, Chief Operating Officer, CEO