

Preparing clients for work

by Brion P. McAlarney

SAMPLE

Scott Silverman was volunteering for a charitable organization in San Diego on a weekly basis, giving back time for those in need after having experienced success in his own recovery. He kept noticing the same people returning every week.

“I started asking people, ‘What are you doing here every week?’” says Silverman. The answer he inevitably received: “I can’t find work.”

Silverman recalls, “I’d say, ‘I’ll help you,’ and they’d say, ‘Well, how are you going to do that?’ I’d say, ‘First, you’ve got to slow down with that attitude because that’s not going to get anybody anywhere, and secondly, if you’re willing to do whatever it takes, I’ll help you.’”

These interactions and the subsequent efforts put forth by the individuals trying to turn their lives around were the seeds for Second Chance, now a 15-year-old nonprofit in San Diego that has experienced exceptional success and national acclaim in helping find work for individuals in recovery and those leaving incarceration. But the road forward for Second Chance wasn’t always smooth.

Silverman realized that helping people find work wasn’t an endeavor he simply could do on the side. He requested the help of local nonprofit leaders to find people jobs and housing, but was rebuffed. “They said, ‘No, that’s not who we are,’ so they wouldn’t work with me,” says Silverman.

Silverman discussed the situation with his wife and decided to work full-time starting and running a nonprofit. “She said, ‘You have no idea what you’re doing.’ I said, ‘I know, but I’ll learn.’ I went to the library, opened up a book on how to start a nonprofit, and that’s how Second Chance got started.”

Linking housing and employment

Silverman, whose professional background was in retail and property management, believed that people could not get a job without an address and could not keep an address without a job. “That’s pretty much what Second Chance’s mission is, and 15 years later we are still doing the same thing,” he says.

The agency’s early growth was slow—by its fourth year, its budget was still only \$75,000. “I really didn’t know how I was going to go one more year,” says Silverman. Then a “60 Minutes” segment on a work readiness training program out of New York City called STRIVE (Support Training Results in Valuable Employees) changed everything.

“I got on the phone and found a way to bring the program out to San Diego,” Silverman says. He now had a program that he



Scott Silverman

could successfully market to funders. Within a year, he raised \$775,000 from donors. The vast majority of the agency’s funding comes from individuals, foundations and corporations, with some public money blended in.

Second Chance has grown exponentially since adopting the STRIVE program, and now includes a prison program in which Second Chance personnel go into facilities and try to place inmates in one of the agency’s sober living homes upon release. Second Chance operates nine sober homes with a total of 174 beds.

Understanding the employer

Second Chance encompasses an intensive three-week program. “By the time someone finishes 120 hours in our classroom, not only do they know what the employer wants, but they’re ready to deliver it,” says Silverman.

The program emphasizes behavioral and attitudinal modification techniques. “[These techniques] really show somebody how to answer a question and look someone in the eye and smile and let them know that you’re going to work for somebody else, and that it’s their money, not yours, and there’s certain things you have to do to make yourself presentable so when that person interviews you you’re likeable,” says Silverman. “It’s tough for people to do that on their own if they’ve never done it before.”

Second Chance implements a “work first” philosophy embodying the notion that finding a better job is easier when you have a job. Second Chance commits to working with participants for two years with its combination of employment, housing and mental health support, though after the three weeks of classroom work it is up to the participants to stay in touch.

Over the next three to five years, Silverman would like to model Second Chance statewide and nationally.

Silverman’s own recovery gives him empathy for the people he serves and an understanding of their nature. “Not only am I empathetic, I’m also holding individuals’ feet to the fire—I’m able to look at it both ways,” he says. He says he spends an hour during the three-week training telling his recovery story to participants.

Silverman says this brings real integrity to the program. “It helps [participants] realize that they can trust this process,” he says. ■

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