



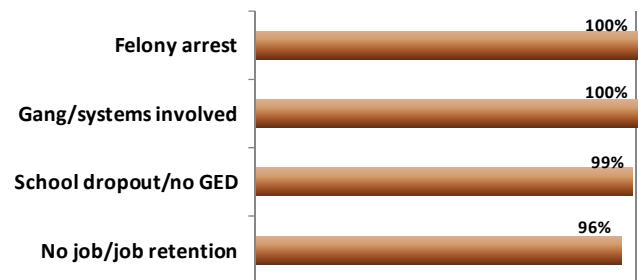
From Good Intentions to Strategic Interventions

Written by Barbara Pierce Parker, Managing Associate, Crime and Justice Institute at CRJ

Roca was founded in 1988 in Chelsea, Massachusetts by a small number of individuals concerned about the rising rates of teen pregnancy and violence in the city. Today, the organization continues to work on these and other issues impacting young people in both Chelsea and Springfield. Over the course of more than two decades, Roca has transformed from a grassroots, confrontational organization into a professionalized, focused, intentional, outcomes-driven one. It has accomplished this through constant evolution as a learning organization in its truest sense. This evolution is driven by the absolute desire to continuously learn how best to change the trajectories of youth and young adults at risk of violence and poverty.

Roca targets a small population of young people that the Urban Institute has described as “never-connected youth” or those who are “persistently disconnected” from school and work (Vericker, Pergamit, Macomber, and Kuehn, 2009, p.1). Nationally it is estimated that this group comprises approximately ten percent of all youth (Bloom, Thompson and Ivry, 2010). It is the group of high school dropouts who are sometimes in gangs, involved with the courts, are often young parents themselves and who interact with and rely on public systems as youth and beyond.

Roca Springfield Participant Risk Factors



Roca’s development illustrates Peter Senge’s articulation of the five central characteristics of a learning organization: 1) systems thinking, 2) personal mastery, 3) understanding the mental models – generalizations and assumptions held and being open to changing them in the face of evidence or potential for innovation, 4) building a shared vision to create the desired effect over the long term, and 5) team learning. This article describes how Roca has weaved these elements together, resulting in a move forward learning to engage partners in the community, to the development of a unique theory of change, and creation of a culture of performance management. Roca’s path also saw the incorporation of proven theories and practices, the establishment of clearly defined elements of practice, professionalization of staff, and the openness and courage to ask for outside scrutiny through evaluation and to learn from it.

A Change in Approach to the Community

Early on in Roca’s 23-year history, the organization operated with a ‘fight the system’ approach. Like many community-based organizations, there was a sense that governmental systems and agencies did

not operate in the best interests of those teens and young adults who were causing the most problems in the community, or worse yet, that the very systems designed to pay attention were simply writing this population off. It is, after all, easy for some to ignore or dismiss these individuals because they typically do not have a strong advocate or voice, are largely disconnected from mainstream institutions and activities and, plain and simple, are hard to work with.

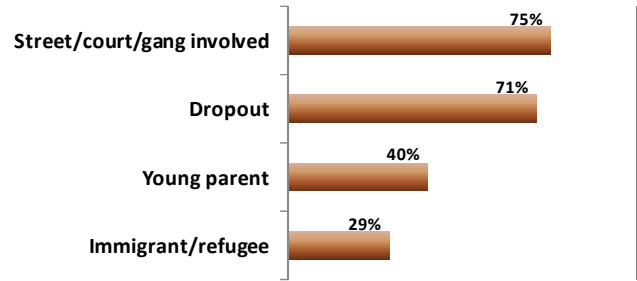
Twelve years into the work, Roca’s leadership came to the realization during its first Peacemaking Circle training that its approach to community agencies was not only not working to ensure that young people are provided opportunities to move their lives in a better direction, but also was in direct conflict with the values the organization purports. Roca was all about building truthful and trusting relationships to engage and move youth towards positive outcomes, so why was this approach not used with other institutions in the community? This marked the birth of what is known as Roca’s *engaged institutions strategy*.

Engaged institutions is a systemic strategy that recognizes that Roca is not alone in its work. The young people it serves are touched by many systems, such as juvenile and criminal justice, law enforcement, public assistance, and health. At its core, Roca understood that, while not intentional, those systems do not always work together or act in ways to best serve young people. Roca

“As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits grow (Senge, 2006, p. 211).

set out to bring to realization Senge’s concept of building a shared vision so that the agencies and individuals lived up to the responsibility to assist this population of high risk young people. In Springfield, this is the population that is male, between the ages of 18 and 24, has had at least one felony arrest, has dropped out and not achieved a GED, and is unemployed and lacks a history of job retention. Roca’s Chelsea participants fall into one of the following categories, however, most fall into more than one: high school dropout or at imminent risk of dropping out, street, court or gang involved, a young parent, and an immigrant or refugee.

Roca Chelsea Participant Risk Factors



A Theory of Change

As Roca built new partnerships, it needed to be able to explain its approach and model to those outside the organization. In 2005, Roca took a crucial step towards clarifying its purpose and codifying its intervention model. With the assistance of David E.K. Hunter, PhD, Roca embarked on the development of its theory of change.

The theory of change was divided into two parts – programmatic and organizational. The programmatic piece theorized that Roca participants would experience positive outcomes through the implementation of relentless outreach, relationships for the purpose of change, peacemaking circles and skill-building opportunities. This compilation of programming is the foundation of Roca’s work today. The organizational-level theory recognized that single programs are not sufficient to impact the trajectories of high risk young people. Instead, it is the combination of strategies and programs that would bring about change. The theory also documented that, in order to reach the desired outcomes, leadership had to be clear and program performance had to be tracked over time, and Roca needed to engage in action learning.

In early 2009, Roca once again partnered with Hunter to assist with further refinement of the organization’s programmatic theory of change. The result was the same core strategies, but now applied to achieve a smaller, more focused set of client-level outcomes with defined indicators to achieve within specific timeframes. This refinement allowed Roca to focus its resources on those outcomes considered by the organization to be the most important to the future

economic independence and safety of the youth it serves.

Incorporation of Proven Models, Practices, and Research

As part of its commitment to learning and bettering the organization for the sake of young people, Roca has identified accepted theories, proven practices and key research and used components of them to strengthen the intervention model. The most evident ones are the Transtheoretical Model, sociological and social psychological theories on relationships, and motivational interviewing, guided by research on disconnected youth.

In 2007, Karen E. Walker and Karen B. Guzzo published the results of their study, *Critical Junctures on the Way to Adulthood: Options for Intervention*, which made the economic case for targeting high risk youth for intervention. At the same time, the authors noted that existing programs do not have the outreach and retention strategies to engage the truly disconnected population of youth. Roca's solution to this was long-term, relentless outreach and programming based on stages of change to engage those who do not intend to take action toward change in the near future (pre-contemplation) or who may be thinking about change but do not see the benefits enough to truly take actions toward it (contemplation). So, while many of the best known at-risk youth programs are designed for those in action (Bloom et. al., 2010), Roca has an intervention designed for the lack of readiness, willingness and motivation prominent in the persistently disconnected.

Roca's incorporation of the stages of change within Prochaska and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1984) was not just theoretical; the organization implemented the stages in very concrete ways. For example, Roca took the five stages of change and put language to and clarified definitions for them as they relate to the initial relationship-building phase of its intervention (e.g., the language attached to pre-contemplation is "Participant is negative towards program and staff"). The youth worker assigns a stage of change to each interaction in the first four to six months (phase 1 of the intervention model) and uses the stages as a tool

to assist with the determination of readiness for certain programming. Those in pre-contemplation, for example, may not be willing, ready or interested enough to attend a series of GED classes, however, bringing them to a drop-in class to try it out might be appropriate for their current motivation and readiness.

Building transformative relationships is one of the four components of Roca's model (the others are relentless outreach, stage based programming and engaged institutions). Youth worker-participant relationships are really the foundation of the model. Roca believes that relationships must exist for change to occur. For example, relationships allow for the modeling of behavior, provide a safe place to practice new behaviors, and can provide motivation for change out of the feeling of not wanting to disappoint another or because that other person has a stake in the behavior. This part of Roca's work is very much in alignment with the body of work around therapeutic relationships and the role of significant others.

Roca has adopted motivational interviewing, "a counseling approach that is a broad collection of techniques employed to help people explore and resolve ambivalence about behavioral change," (Lundahl, Kunz, Brownell, Tollefson, and Burke, 2010, p.137) as one of the core approaches. This form of interviewing is used in many fields, such as substance abuse treatment and community corrections supervision, and has been shown through research to bolster motivation to change and adherence to treatment. Youth workers use motivational interviewing to keep participants engaged with them over a period of at least two years to motivate them to participate in skill building activities and courses. The reason this approach works well is that Roca's model is designed to serve only those who begin on the lower end of the stage of change spectrum (pre-contemplation and contemplation) who are by definition on the lower end of a motivation continuum. Second, the model is based on the belief that young people can change when engaged in relationships and given specific opportunities over time. The practice is so aligned with Roca's work that the organization contracts with an individual who provides weekly coaching in the technique.

As a learning organization, Roca incorporates practices with an evidence base, and continues to utilize research on its populations of interest and its programming. As Roca seeks to ensure that its funding is used most effectively, the research by Walker and Guzzo, for example, has led the organization to hone its target population. Roca focuses on older adolescents with specific behavioral indicators – school expulsion, having a child before age 18, juvenile conviction, gang involvement, and not finishing high school – because of their links to what Walker and Guzzo call adverse early adult outcomes (Walker and Guzzo, n.d.). These have influenced the in-school population Roca serves as well as that of the first replication site in Springfield. While the in-school program used to focus on those at risk for dropping out, there is now a greater emphasis on that risk factor in combination with the other characteristics associated with the adverse early adult outcomes.

Implementation of Performance Management

The same set of circumstances that led to the articulation of the theory of change, and that process itself, naturally led to the need to measure progress and outcomes at the participant level. Roca would no longer settle for assuming it was doing good work – proof was needed that it was moving young people down the intended path toward the stated outcomes. With this recognition, the organization made the decision to adopt a performance management system. Roca chose Social Solutions' Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) web-based data collection and reporting system and implemented it in early 2006.

Because Roca had an articulated theory of change, it was in a strong position to be a full partner in the customization of the ETO software. Unlike many organizations new to data systems, Roca knew what it needed and wanted. ETO was set up to record demographic information, criteria for enrollment, key case dates, youth worker-participant contacts, programming attendance, and dismissal information.

While these are typical components of a data system, Roca took ETO further. As an example, Roca's use of Prochaska and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model of Change, mentioned above, is so instrumental to understanding participants' movement along the five stages of change that it was incorporated into ETO. This Model of Change has been operationalized within the performance management system in the assessment of readiness to move through the phases of the intervention model, readiness for certain levels of programming, as an indicator of the strength of the youth worker-participant relationship, and to evaluate participant progress on service plans.

While customization and full implementation of a data system is a multi-year effort, Roca's leadership quickly understood the possibilities. Soon after initial implementation, the leaders were asking themselves what reports are needed to help manage the organization, entice potential

funders, help supervisors oversee the work of staff, assist staff to manage their own work, and manage participant movement and progress through the model.

Roca also recognized that the availability of comprehensive data positioned the organization for evaluation. In preparation for this, evaluation

“Roca has gone far beyond simple data capture and reporting. They have developed many of the higher-level performance management characteristics and skills we addressed in Leap of Reason. They clearly have visionary leadership, a strong and highly specific theory of change, solid definitions of outcomes and measurements, a highly talented and engaged staff, a data collection and reporting system that links those elements together. But perhaps most important, they have created and sustained an organizational culture that values and operationalizes performance management at nearly every level, addressing each area of programming, with clear buy-in from all staff and constituents. What they achieved is quite advanced and very impressive.”

– Mario Morino, author of Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity

partners scrutinized the data and data collection structure to set it up for longitudinal analysis. Over the last few years, redundancies have been eliminated, data elements have been added, elements and items have been re-worded, and questions have been asked with the intention of clarifying criteria associated with the intervention model so that they can be detected through analysis. The comprehensiveness of Roca's data, quite unique for a community-based non-profit, has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners across the country.

While implementation of a data system is a crucial element of performance management, Mario Morino insists in his recently released monograph, *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity*, in which Roca earned mention, "Technology is *not* the decisive factor in whether organizations make the transition to managing outcomes and raise their impact..." (Morino, 2011, p. 20-21). Rather, he cites a set of conditions that must be in place – leadership that is determined to ensure that what they are doing is effective and sustainable, a board engaged to the extent that it knows how the work is done and actively works to ensure that what is done is truly benefiting the target populations, clear purpose, and a performance culture (Morino, 2011, p. 65-69).

Professionalization of Staff

To develop a sustainable performance culture and to ensure that staff at all levels have a clear sense of purpose, Roca has: 1) graphically articulated the strategy (mission, goals and objectives), theory of change (target population, participant outcomes, and programs and services), and performance management (indicators, measures and data sources) components of the work and the relationships between them; and, 2) developed systems and tools for training and supervision.

Over the past two years, the organization has significantly enhanced its training component. As the model was further clarified, the training was made more structured and formal. The thought was if Roca is going to achieve its outcomes in the specified timeframes, staff need to be doing youth work in specific ways – there is no time to waste. This sense

of urgency has led to a comprehensive training schedule and set of requirements. There are one-on-one trainings for new staff, quarterly refresher trainings on the model, monthly content-based topic trainings, and monthly process-related trainings.

To reinforce training and to continuously coach staff, Roca has developed an impressive tool for weekly youth worker staff supervision, which has been programmed into ETO. It essentially formalizes and codifies the content of supervision meetings. The tool ensures that each participant on a caseload is reviewed in depth at least once per month and guides the conversation according to core model components. The supervision tool provides for discussions of specific strategies and planning through the identification of one success and one challenge each week. Supervisors also record their reflections on the youth workers performance during the week based on supervisor observations and worker demonstrations of the skills during the supervision time. Lastly, staff are encouraged to set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) goals for their own personal and professional development. Similar versions of the supervision tool are available for use with work crew supervisors, teachers and job developers.

In addition to the supervision tool, supervisors now run reports generated in ETO to use with staff on a weekly basis. The key reports utilized are contact standards (are youth workers having contact with participants at least twice per week?), programming standards (are participants attending programming twice per week?), and an in-depth programming report that identifies the programming and services in which each participant is engaged. The first two reports can also be aggregated to the team level to monitor performance at that level.

With a clear model and supportive processes and tools in place, Roca's sustainability is no longer dependent on one or two individuals.

Refinement of Elements of Practice

As it continues to learn through intense performance management and the ongoing exploration of research, Roca refines the intervention model often in both

small and large ways. While constant change can frustrate researchers who would prefer to study a model held constant, ongoing improvement is the hallmark of an outcomes-driven, learning organization determined to best serve young people in its care.

Examples of model refinements include efforts to refocus on serving those most disengaged and disconnected, making potentially subjective decision points more objective, and modification of the length of the intervention. The focus of resources on the highest risk populations is best evidenced in Roca's replication site in Springfield. This site has strict criteria that must all be met to be enrolled in the model. If a young person does not have at least one felony arrest, is not gang-, court- or systems-involved, does not live in a specific geographic area within the city, has a GED (not obtained while incarcerated), or has a job or a history of employment retention, he will not be a Roca participant.

Over the years, Roca's implementation evaluation partners have sought clarity on key parts of the intervention model that seemed intangible or possibly open to interpretation. Roca came to see the value in making events such as transitions through the phases of the model and completion of the intervention more concrete. There is now a clear set of criteria for such events. Roca continues to refine its programming as well.

As a final example, Roca's long held assumption was that the organization needed to work intensively with young people for up to three years – the longer the intervention, the better the result. Through continued examination of the data related to assumptions built into the design of the model, Roca found that participants do better when they reach certain milestones within two years. Roca has quickly shifted to a new way of business and developed an articulation of how the model would work in this shorter timeframe.

Commitment to Outside Evaluation

Roca is not only a learning organization but is a values-led one. It is these values that are driving Roca to raise money for and expose itself to outside evaluation. The commitment to evaluation is about

ensuring that the intervention model is having the intended impact – that it is assisting youth and young adults who, without intervention, would be on a path to economic dependence on public systems and unhealthy and unsafe lives.

Roca's desire to invest in evaluation is extremely important in the context of what is known, or more appropriately, not known about at-risk young people. Very few programs targeting truly disconnected and disengaged youth have been evaluated rigorously. The ones that have been evaluated have shown mixed results. An MDRC compilation of research and expert opinion, *Building a Learning Agenda around Disconnected Youth*, points to some positive results particularly with shorter term outcomes, but issues a strong call for evaluations of established programs and the development of new strategies to engage “the more profoundly disconnected” (Bloom et. al., 2010).

Conclusion

Roca has evolved, through its commitment to continual learning, from a small group of youth workers befriending gang members they found on the streets of Chelsea, Massachusetts into a professional, sustainable, results-oriented organization. Roca has put systems in place to ensure it is reaching the designated target population, delivering the core components of the model with the intended frequency and dosage, and meeting the milestones toward participant outcomes. Roca's leadership has clarified the intervention so that it is better implemented by staff and better understood by those outside of Roca. It has incorporated proven practices and has developed greater community understanding of and investment in the youth who many fear or simply would rather not encounter. The organization has elevated this population's importance and promise by becoming an effective organization. In recent years, Roca has become an integral part of the national conversation on disconnected youth. The organization has been highlighted in books and articles about disengaged and disconnected youth, has been featured at many conferences, and receives a plethora of requests for information from other youth-serving organizations in this county and internationally. This is no accident. Its model answers the many calls from social scientists for

strategies to reach and retain these young people, to provide a means to help them develop skills towards economic independence and to keep them off the streets and out of prison, and to have an evaluable intervention with potential for widespread replication.

It is imperative that Roca's model be studied for impact – and this requires investment. Much of the funding made available for the 16 to 24 year old population is designated for primary prevention. By design, these programs treat individuals who may or may not engage in negative or harmful behaviors in the future. To have greater potential impact socially and fiscally, it makes sense, as Walker and Guzzo propose, to focus resources on those already displaying those risk factors connected with adverse outcomes in adulthood (Walker and Guzzo, n.d.).

Many organizations say they are serving youth and young adults who are at high risk for negative outcomes, such as violence and incarceration, but as Bloom et. al.(2010) noted, the most well-known and well-funded are reaching those who may be at risk but who demonstrate a level of readiness or motivation for behavior change. An important segment of the at-risk population is still being left out. Roca has worked to professionalize its work and has designed its intervention specifically for those young adults who continue to be left out – those who most programs cannot reach.

Early results from an implementation study show that:

- Roca is reaching at-risk young adults and its model works best for the highest risk;
- Roca's relentless outreach works to move young people along a continuum towards behavior change; and,
- Roca has the ability to retain young adults in a non-mandated intervention where they reengage in educational programming and

prepare for the workforce (Crime and Justice Institute, 2011).

If the intervention model is proven through rigorous evaluation to move those at risk towards more positive adult outcomes, adoption of core components of the intervention model could have far-reaching effects on how community-based and governmental agencies work with those who are disconnected from the mainstream.

Roca's approach has the most potential to impact the fields of juvenile and criminal justice. At its

foundation, Roca's model is a risk-reduction program. It focuses on reducing the likelihood that high-risk youth will either re-offend or get deeper into the criminal justice system. It does this through the identification of those youth who pose the greatest threat to public safety and community stability, and through the provision of targeted support, treatment and services, works to reduce a young person's risk of further anti-social activity. By reducing the risk of these behaviors, public safety improves.

Roca offers to criminal justice an approach to address lack of community correctional supervision compliance and lack of participation in treatment through its relentless outreach. Roca puts forward its transformational relationships to ready young people for change

and to support them through it and provides a means to deal with behavioral relapse and treat it as a learning opportunity. Finally, Roca presents a method to engage young adults and provide programming in life skills, education and workforce readiness whether the young person initially wants to participate or not – and it currently does all of this with a non-mandated population. Imagine the possibilities with a population that is at least compelled to have some

Roca is one of my favorite examples of an organization that has really committed itself to building a learning culture, from its relentless focus on outcomes and challenging existing practice to its "relentless relationship building" with youth at risk. Roca's evolution, well illustrated in this article, tracks a remarkable journey from angry youth advocates to sophisticated interventionists in the systems that generate what are widely seen as intractable social problems in America."

Quote from Peter Senge, November, 2011

level of contact with the program. The time is now to study the effects of Roca's intervention model.

References

- Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., and Ivry, R. (2010). Building a learning agenda around disconnected youth. *Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1-40*.
- Crime and Justice Institute (2011). Unpublished data.
- Lundahl, B. W., Kunz, C., Brownell, C., Tollefson, D. and Burke, B. L. (2010). A meta-analysis of motivational interviewing: Twenty-five years of empirical studies. *Research on Social Practice 20; 137*.
- Morino, M. (2011). Leap of reason: Managing to outcomes in an era of scarcity. Washington, D.C.: Venture Philanthropy Partners.
- Prochaska J. and DiClemente, C. (1984) *The Transtheoretical Approach: Crossing the Traditional Boundaries of Therapy* Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin.
- Senge, P. M. (2009). The fifth discipline: The arts and practice of the learning organization. New York: DoubleDay.
- Walker K.E. and Guzzo K.B., n.d. Critical junctures on the way to adulthood: Options for intervention. *Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia PA*.
- Vericker, T., Pergamit, M., Macomber, J. and Kuehn, D. (2009). *Vulnerable youth and the transition to adulthood*, ASPE Policy Brief. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1-4.