

A Win-Win-Win

When people come home from prison, much is at stake. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) helps men and women gain and retain employment—not an easy feat if one has a criminal record—and build better lives. The alternative, reincarceration, is far too common. Without support, more than half return to prison or jail within three years.

“We collect data because we need to know that our participants are progressing. There's nothing worse than not knowing if what you're doing has impact,” said COO Brad Dudding. “We want to make sure our services are tailored to each participant.” CEO runs an evidence-based program, which has been shown to reduce recidivism by 16-22%. For more than ten years, the organization has systematically collected data and used it to manage to outcomes.

Spotlight on Individual Performance

CEO's programs make use of dashboards with visual representations of the extent to which participants are meeting programmatic milestones and direct service workers are carrying out their tasks to help participants as expected.

This kind of transparency—which means that all staff can see how well everyone else is performing—was initially hard. The purpose of comparing the performance of individuals was to ensure that everyone performed at the highest possible level, so that clients would experience the best possible outcomes. Given the difficulty of the work, there had to be a constant focus on improvement. That meant that people had to feel comfortable discussing their work openly in team meetings, and if performance could be better, the expectation had to be to support improvement.

Managers paid a lot of attention to creating psychological safety. “Over time, this approach has resulted in a strong climate of both competition and support,” said Brad, who has observed that regular reflection on data brings his teams together more often. “It's a win for staff, because they keep learning and have the satisfaction of knowing that they are truly helping people, and for clients, who experience better outcomes. It's also a win for the organization, because we have confidence that we are fulfilling our mission.”

Viewing Data Through a Different Lens

Being a Superstar Award Partner aligned perfectly with CEO's already data-informed culture. There were bonuses for meeting monthly metrics, but a Superstar Award added something different. It became a formal way to acknowledge direct service workers' mastery of critical job skills, because the rigorous application requires demonstrating that a worker is using data to serve clients *better*. Tying staff recognition to an initiative outside of CEO—led by a national foundation—also added credibility and gave the award more weight.

“Data is most often used to report and improve. The Superstar Award is a great way to celebrate what's going well and recognize those who are doing exceptionally good work,” said Brad. “If your goal is to support and enhance a data-informed culture, this is one way to do it.” Last year's winner was posted on an internal chatter system, and there were a lot of positive reactions. Next time around, Brad is looking forward to making it an even bigger deal.

Guaranteeing an Internal Winner

“It's motivating for managers to have the opportunity to nominate people for a cash award who do their jobs particularly well, especially when they know that the award is within reach,” said Brad. The first year, CEO submitted a nomination through the regular Superstar nomination process, but when the opportunity to be a Superstar Award Partner came along, they grabbed it with both hands. What better than being in their own pool and being guaranteed that someone from CEO would win an award?