



Podcast Script – Recruiting Staff to Fit Your Organizational Culture

Host/Interviewer (H) **Guest (G) – Zelda Spence**

- H:** Welcome listeners! My name is Sarah, a curriculum and training specialist on the U.S. Department of Education’s You for Youth Technical Assistance Team. In this podcast series, we investigate how to build a positive organizational culture. We will speak with a practitioner who will share her best practices for cultivating an organizational culture and climate that is aligned with their vision, mission and values. And with that, I’d like to introduce you to Zelda, a project director for five 21st CCLC sites with over 10 years experience in education, both during the school-day and afterschool. Zelda and her team have developed a positive organizational culture by intentionally aligning their hiring process to their organization’s vision, mission and core values. Her team’s experience highlights how using the organization’s vision, mission and core values in hiring practices is essential to forming a positive organizational culture and climate. To ensure staff align with the overall organizational culture, Zelda and her team first determined positive behaviors associated with their organization’s core values. The list of positive behaviors then provides specific characteristics or behaviors to look for when interviewing potential candidates. Through their experience we will learn how building a positive culture begins as early as hiring. Welcome Zelda.
- G:** It’s a pleasure to be here, thank you for having me.
- H:** Let’s start at the beginning. Can you tell us how you got started with 21st CCLC programs?
- G:** Sure. I sort of stumbled into urban public education after taking some time off for several years raising my children. I was getting my Master’s in Social Work – which led to me being offered a teaching position at a middle school. I later transitioned into the role of social worker at the same school right about the time our district received its first 5-Year 21st CCLC grant. A few years into the grant, I became a Site Coordinator and then several years later, I was selected to become the Project Director.
- H:** That sounds like quite an evolution!
- G:** It has been, thank you so much! I’ve seen the program grow from essentially a seemingly invisible, misunderstood project within the district to one of its most successfully implemented programs.
- H:** What do you think are some of the reasons for that success?
- G:** Fundamentally, our culture is that our program strives to be intentional, relevant, and innovative with everything that we do. We recognize that it takes a village, so we engage school day teachers, school administration, community partners, central office personnel, and the students’ families with many program elements. We have found that being collaborative with our programming efforts that’s the primary contributor to our success.



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- H:** Intentional, relevant and innovative are some of your organization’s core values highlighted in your program’s vision and mission, correct?
- G:** Yes, Sarah. Our mission is to provide a safe, well-supervised environment beyond the traditional school day, in which youth participate in a variety of educational, cultural, and youth development activities. The activities are designed to foster a commitment to education as well as life-long learning, to promote positive behavior, and to fulfill everyone’s potential for intellectual, emotional, and social growth. We are committed to the core values of being intentional, relevant and innovative along with building relationships. Our staff must commit to doing whatever it takes for every student to achieve high academic standards.
- H:** And I hear that it’s working?
- G:** Yes! According to the latest data, the students taking part in our 21st CCLC programs are outperforming their peers on both state assessments and report card grades. I mean, we can always do better, but the progress is noticeable!
- H:** Congratulations!
- G:** Thank you so much!
- H:** It wasn’t always as effective as it is now, though. You’ve been with the program several years. How were things when you first became Project Director?
- G:** Initially, we experienced high staff turnover. We struggled with meeting our target level of student service numbers, and parents were minimally engaged. There was little alignment to the school day, if at all, and teachers were working with limited resources. At that time our program was stale and it was in trouble.
- H:** Can you elaborate for our listeners about why high staff turnover can be a major problem?
- G:** Well, for our students and their families, we aim to be a constant; reliability is another one of our organization’s core values. You must do what you say you will do and maintain the stability that our families deserve. When you have high turnover, as we did, it is very difficult to create an atmosphere where rituals and routines are cultivated. High staff turnover also definitely adversely impacts student engagement because staff and students don’t have time to build relationships. If you fail to build a shared, consistent atmosphere of trust and reliability, students will not truly invest in the program. And subsequently, the lack of consistent, reliable staff can severely limit your student outcomes and compromise your ability to run a high-quality program.
- H:** So how did you combat that high turnover problem?



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- G:** I knew we needed to make a change, so I started having conversations with various stakeholders. I wanted a variety of perspectives. Then, I brought all that information back to our program team. We posed a lot of questions. Who are the kinds of people who match our organizational culture? How could we determine who possesses or shares our core values? And where can we find them?
- H:** How important were those conversations in generating those questions? And in turn, the answers?
- G:** Oh my goodness, immensely. I think when programs need to hire people they sometimes hurry to fill the position. I understand that reflex, I do, but the wrong person won't last, and then you repeat the process over and over. You owe it to your program to take the time to find the right person.
- H:** Can you give us some specifics you and your program team implemented to turn this problem around?
- G:** As a staff, we thought about what behaviors a person would display if they possessed our core values. All staff must demonstrate your core values if you are going to achieve your vision and fulfill your mission. All must demonstrate your core values if your site is going to maintain a positive culture and climate. And to demonstrate core values, leadership must be explicit as to what doing so means. For example, when you are innovative, what does that exactly look like, what does it feel like or sound like.
- H:** How intriguing!
- G:** Yes! If we are innovative in addressing the unique needs of each student, if we are going to relentlessly push for academic excellence, if we are going to build and foster positive relationships with our students, we need new staff members to be innovative as well. We needed to determine how best to identify those individuals in the hiring process. Because our program is housed in a district, our staff are district employees and we must follow the district's hiring practices. For our program's purposes, we reviewed the district's hiring requirements and located an area where the program had flexibility to make it our own. We found that to be during the Q&A section of the interview process. During that portion of the interview we could design the process to best meet our needs.
- G:** How did you define the Q&A section to really align with your mission, vision and core values?
- H:** What we did is we developed scenario-based questions to assess whether the candidate shares our core values. Their reaction and response demonstrate whether they possess our core values.
- H:** Can you give us an example?



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- G:** Of course! Let's take innovation. During an interview, I may pull out my cell phone, appear to read a text, immediately apologize but say that we need to move the interview to another location because I am desperately needed elsewhere. I let the candidate know we will need to move the interview to the site and take them with me. Along the way, I share the issue and ask how they might handle it.
- H:** What are the typical responses?
- G:** If someone becomes panicked or annoyed, then we know they are not a good fit. Things come up in afterschool, as you know! You must be able to manage it well and be comfortable developing solutions in the moment; that's the innovative value. If the candidate is relaxed and suggests solutions, then that candidate is someone we will seriously consider.
- H:** If someone offers possible solutions, how does that provide insight into one of your core values?
- G:** Someone who is concerned for the overall well-being of our students and families is someone who understands the importance of relationships. Anyone we hire will be trained, but we want people who are team players who value our participants. We need people who will want to seek out ways to honor our students and their families. Wanting to jump in and immediately help shows the level of compassion and empathy they have for others, which are two crucial characteristics for building relationships. It also indicates that they will be a staff member who is innovative in their approach to problem-solving.
- H:** And these scenarios have worked?
- G:** Believe it or not, they have! And we have been using several different scenarios for some time now. We mix and match to fit the current role. And it's worked! Seven years later, we have little to no turn-over. My staff want to return year after year, and not just for the school-year, but for the summer sessions as well!
- H:** In the beginning of the podcast, you mentioned creating a consistent, stable program for your families and students, making sure your team was reliable. Have families and students also recognized this change?
- G:** Oh, my goodness, I'm happy to report, yes! The average time a family member spends at pick-up is 18-minutes and at summer camp drop-off and pick up we have to push families out the door! Really! We have families who demand their child be enrolled in our program. Our program went from being relatively unknown to a highlight within our district and a hallmark within the local community. These are all indicators of our families recognizing the value of our program and positive interactions that come with enrolling their children. Our students enjoy participating which is why they re-enroll each year.



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- H:** And this is a byproduct of intentionally aligning your hiring practices with your core values to build a team which reflects the desired organizational culture?
- G:** Well, we believe so. I have a great team. We are reliable. We can depend on each other to maintain our culture and climate. We can rely on each other to go the extra mile and consistently follow through. We have collectively built a stable, engaging program and that is so important; we can see the fruits of our labor reflected in how our students, our families, and even school day staff treat the program. We have become a dependable, resourceful constant in their lives and the result has been incredible!
- H:** Thank you very much for spending time with the U.S. Department of Education’s Y4Y Team today. We appreciate hearing your experience and listening to the strategy you and your team have used to cultivate a positive organizational culture.
- G:** Thank you for having me. We’re happy to share!
- H:** Now that you’ve heard about the success Zelda and her team have enjoyed using culture and climate to recruit and retain staff, it’s your turn. Consider the approach they took. Think about the core values within your own program. Think about scenarios that consistently arise. Can you use those scenarios to develop scenario-based questions to learn whether a potential candidate holds your organization’s core values in your application or interview process? How can you get to the root of a candidate to see if he or she will align well with the greater culture? Creating practice scenarios might be a great way to ensure you hire someone who shares your values. Encourage your staff to live out those values and don’t make the mistake of hiring someone who doesn’t share those same ideas. If your organization has yet to list your core values or define them through climate statements, be sure to check-out the Organizational Culture Tools in this Click & Go.