

LEADERSHIP PROFILE

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: THE POWER OF LISTENING

An interview with Peggy O'Neil, Executive Director of the WISE program

Peggy O'Neil listens, and listens - a lot.

When she took on the role of Executive Director at WISE in 2003 she made a commitment to make time, regularly, to listen to staff, board members, community members, and especially to the women served by the organization. She credits her organization's success in doubling its size over the last 10 years to what she has learned from listening to these various groups.

O'Neil developed her skill and appreciation for active listening when she volunteered for the Samaritans and worked a crisis hotline for people contemplating suicide. It was through this experience that she learned the power of human connection during a crisis.

"Though we knew we necessarily couldn't always prevent callers from taking their life, we could at least tread water with them until help could arrive," she recalls. "Listening carefully to people allows you to figure out the best way to engage them in the work."

When O'Neil joined the WISE staff, she knew she had a whole different set of challenges on her hands. She knew it was imperative to work in partnership with the staff and board to build a culture of support, transparency and good communication at WISE.

"Let's face it, the work we do is tough. We are working with people who have been through deeply traumatic situations. We've got to have support systems within the organization to allow our staff and volunteers to focus on the important job in front of them." Over the past 10 years, O'Neil has built that infrastructure by adding dedicated finance and HR staff, beefing up IT systems and carving out a strong management team.

O'Neil believes it is a commitment to building a nimble and solid infrastructure combined with an equal attention to building a healthy culture that really moves an organization. She emphasizes the intentionality of the work she did to build a healthy culture.

"We all sort of felt we had a culture, but we couldn't really describe it. A while back, a new employee came in and set up her office beautifully but with her desk placed between her and the woman she would be counseling. Immediately we knew that this didn't fit with our culture. We don't want any barriers between us and the women we work with, but we had never told the new staff person this. We have since taken the time as a staff to develop our values, to write them down and discuss the way they play out in our work."



In addition, the WISE direct service staff meets weekly to address how traumatic situations affect them. O'Neil points to a framed picture above her desk of her name surrounded by several dozen adjectives arranged into a word cloud. "During a period of organizational change, we met as a group and came up with meaningful descriptors for each other, which we then framed for everyone. It's a great reminder of the positive skills we each bring to the table — especially during the tough times."

She also thinks a lot about her role as a leader in the organization and usually has more questions than answers. Several years back, she invested in working with a coach to help her better understand her own goals and leadership style.

O'Neil recalls that one of the "scariest things" the coach did was to contact a dozen key people in her life to get their perspective of her strengths and weaknesses.

"While it was pretty intimidating at first, it was one of the best things I ever did," she said. "Holding up a mirror to my own leadership style has helped me to see everything I did more clearly, and helped me to better define the roles and practices within the organization. In our line of work, you have to be 100% genuine in what you say and do. We're working with women whose lives have been turned upside down. They need to be able to count on us without question. If we're not practicing what we preach, they'll know it in an instant."

Clear values, regular and transparent communication and strong workplace cultures have become the hallmarks of what O'Neil has infused throughout the WISE community.

While reaching into her desk drawer to get a doggie biscuit for Cassie, a gentle black lab who visits the office regularly, O'Neil reflects on the thousands of women in the Upper Valley who have benefited from WISE's services over the years. She shares that she feels lucky to be part of such an important organization and to work with so many talented people.

Of all the things she's learned along the way, she notes, she has never forgotten those first key lessons she learned long ago: the power of human connection and the value of listening.

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