

Building Support for Innovation Inside Child Welfare Agencies

Background

The *Family to Family* Initiative was designed in 1992 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The framework for the Initiative is grounded in the belief that reforms in family foster care must be focused on a more family-centered approach that is: (1) responsive to the individualized needs of children and their families, (2) rooted in the child's community or neighborhood, (3) sensitive to cultural differences, and (4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions. The Initiative has the following system-wide goals:

- To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities where the children live;
- To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (but to only those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes;
- To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care by meeting the needs of many more of the children currently in those settings through family foster care;
- To increase the number and quality of foster families;
- To reunify children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished based on the family's and children's needs—not simply the system's time frames;
- To reduce the lengths of stay of children in out-of-home care; and
- To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

As a result of the experience in *Family to Family* sites, a variety of practical tools has been developed. This booklet describes one such tool—Building Support for Innovation Inside Child Welfare Agencies.

The one predictable aspect of work in the child welfare field is unpredictability. Change is constant, arriving as repeated crises and emergencies as well as in the form of unexpected policy decrees, budgetary shifts, and personnel shakeups. **Family to Family** is a strategic approach to reform of the child welfare system that includes built-in mechanisms for managing change, thus taming the anxiety that surrounds the new. These mechanisms of organizational development work by harnessing the energy of the agency and the commitment of the people who work in it.

Successful efforts to change a system do these things well:

- Connect vision to action;
- Engage those affected by change in helping to design the change;
- Expect resistance to change and learn to work through it; and
- Build a shared language and tools for achieving the goals.

To contain workers' anxiety during change, and to be effective leaders, managers need:

- A shared vision of what counts as success for the organization;
- A shared understanding of how best to organize people, tools, and money for success;
- Enough data to track any movement toward or away from the goals; and
- Analytic capacity to understand the data.

Organizational development is most useful to leaders and managers when their tasks are to keep the organization focused on its goals despite the distraction of crises, to understand and address the pressures that come with change; and to manage the problems and tasks that change creates.

Managers need to think about the kinds of pressures they face. Which are invigorating, which frustrating? Which are both? Some people fear the unknown in change; others are overwhelmed by its volume, or feel chaos in any loss of control. Others feel incompetent at a new challenge. Knowing one's own attitudes and those of one's employees is a crucial first step.

Here are some indicators that existing tactics for managing worker anxiety may not be working:

- People are asking for more guidance on issues you have already explained thoroughly, as though saying, "make these problems go away."
- Most final decisions end up on your desk although you think you have delegated enough authority to solve the problems.
- Employees feel overworked but cannot complete their tasks.
- Formal feedback is evasive or incomplete, avoiding detailed discussion.

Organizational development tools can help build a new system while retaining the best features of the old one. Rather than building a parallel organizational structure—more work to do—that then diverts workers' resources and time, **Family to Family** principles can be introduced as a way to get work done under existing procedures.

Family to Family is a strategic approach to reform of the child welfare system that includes built-in mechanisms for managing change.

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Systems Thinking

Family to Family reform requires systemic thinking that connects each part of the changing pattern to the entire picture. An intake unit, for example, can cut its response time down to just a few hours, but if the Child Abuse and Neglect and Foster Care units cannot handle the incoming caseload, the system may fail. Systemic thinking is itself a tool for managing change.

During a crisis, attention naturally flows to the part of the overall system where the problem appears. Without systemic thinking, we may confuse the presentation of the problem with the cause. We fix something at the presentation point, and then we are frustrated when the same kind of problem keeps recurring. We have not fixed the cause, only the symptom, because we have focused on parts of the system. Yet the outside world, the courts, the media, and the community will hold the entire agency responsible for any tragedy that occurs.

We often think that we understand a system when we understand its parts, but we have only just begun. Systems are about the relationships between the parts. The parts must run properly and efficiently in their own environments, but they must also cooperate with each other for the system as a whole to operate properly. As people focus on managing their individual parts of a child welfare system, the tendency may be to build walls around areas of responsibility and avoid thinking about the system as a whole.

Managers must resist this tendency and seek instead to:

- ❑ Build understanding at every level about how each part fits into the whole system;
- ❑ Spread the work of worry about the whole system across every managerial level; and
- ❑ Create a climate that encourages feedback and an active, receptive response to it.

Diagnosing Relationships: Virtuous-Vicious Cycles

Work can be viewed as sets of activities that flow like a river through the system's rocky walls and boundaries. The flow is only as smooth and as fast as the slowest, most turbulent part of the system allows. The processing of foster children may be quick and efficient, but if referrals pile up without any foster homes being available for placement, the flow of work will stop.

We often attribute bottlenecks to particular people and blame their ineffectiveness. Systems thinking teaches us to examine the problem systemically first, and then decide how much can be attributed to individuals. Sometimes the functioning of a part of the system cannot be improved, perhaps because of outside pressures. In that case, the parts around it may be adjusted or workloads shifted to reduce pressure buildups in any one part of the system.

For example, many social service systems focus on returning a child to the family quickly and on helping the parents obtain job or educational training, but they fail to address the need to improve parenting skills in the home. As a result, too many children may end up back in the care of the system after renewed abuse. The families have lost an

opportunity for improvement, the agency may lose standing in the eyes of the community, and the staff workers may feel a sense of failure and frustration. The goal of returning the child to the family is in apparent conflict with the broader goal of creating a better home for both the child and the family.

Systemic thinking would examine the repeating pattern of activity, or vicious cycle, and seek ways to turn it into a virtuous cycle instead. In this example, placement and training might both claim to be functioning well, and yet the need for parenting skills is not being met because the larger goal of a better-working family is not clearly in everyone's mind.

Managers and leaders may feel so beset by crises that they cannot find the time to identify and deal with vicious cycles. But only time spent doing so can help everyone learn to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again, creating space and time to work on other urgent issues.

Managing Boundaries

In tightly coupled systems like child welfare agencies, most constraints are found at the points where one part of the organization hands off activity to another part—investigation, intake, child abuse/neglect determination, training, foster care. We refer to these transfer points as boundaries. They can be permeable membranes through which information passes freely, or solid walls that block achievement of system goals. They are the places where people negotiate with one another on what each one will and won't do.

Boundaries can also exist across hierarchies—e.g., between a director and program managers, between managers and supervisors, or between supervisors and case workers. The boundary between a system and its external environment is critical as well. In the case of social service agencies, those

on the other side of the boundary include community groups, the judicial system, the media, and others with a stake in the work.

The management of internal boundaries affects the management of external ones. When citizens call to report a problem, do the people they speak to give an impression of being knowledgeable, competent, and comprehensive? When the social worker goes into the community, is she seen as professional, assured, and competent? Is the response time reasonable between a call to the organization and follow-up by a social worker?

These activities may look internal, but each occurs on a boundary with the external environment. Understanding this will help managers see that a problem may become visible in a way or place unrelated to its cause. For example, the percentage of children coming into the system with severe injury may increase, but not necessarily because rates of abuse are changing. It may be that members of the community have concluded that the system does not respond to minor trouble, and so calls are not made and intervention does not occur until a case becomes serious.

To start dealing with boundary issues, think of each unit as a team working on a task. Do all the members agree on what that task is and on how to achieve it? Each team should be able to answer questions like these:

- Why are we doing this work? What is our contribution to the whole system?
- What exactly is our task? What do we do that is different from what others do?
- What mix of skills do we need to do this work? What is missing?

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Systems thinking recognizes that teams need to use the different talents of all their members.

- What are we accountable for?
To whom are we accountable?
- What assumptions are we making about what others do, vs. what we do? Whom do we include in our team? How many other teams are there?
- What do we need from other teams that would make our job easier? What do they need from us?

Answering these questions leads right away to boundary management issues. Are foster parents trained well enough to handle the strains we impose? Are they supported by other parts of the system? Are the file and data systems giving everyone access to full information about a case across the teams? Often an investigation of a misunderstanding, mistake, or information gap can reveal a systemic problem at a boundary that may be contributing to a vicious cycle.

Continuous Learning: Dialogue and Feedback

It is easy to say that mistakes offer rich opportunities for learning to improve performance. It is very difficult, however, to create a climate where managers and employees actually believe this is possible—a climate of respectful, direct talk without recrimination. Managers can do this by:

- First analyzing work flow and part-whole relationships when a problem occurs, rather than placing immediate blame on individuals;
- Creating opportunities to learn by doing (action learning); and
- Encouraging dialogue and feedback continuously, through good times and bad.

In times of rapid change, it is particularly important to discover whether a manager's words have been understood in the way intended, and whether those in the middle and on the frontline are putting those words into action in a way that is achieving the stated goals. It may be painful to examine mistakes, especially if further crises are looming, but systems thinking can provide a climate of safety in which to view mistakes as critical data in the diagnosis and management of organizational problems.

Systems Thinking: Implications for Action

The primary task of managers and leaders will always be that of enabling the desired outcomes for families and children. Systemic thinking helps leaders distinguish among tasks to delegate and tasks they must do personally. The system needs a shared vision to guide movement, for example, and such a vision cannot be imposed from the top. It requires that those responsible for executing the agency's work be involved in designing that work. Similarly, hierarchies are not in themselves problems, but they must have open channels for feedback and learning if the entire system is to function properly. Systems thinking recognizes that teams need to use the different talents of all their members, and that role assignments should be flexible—it is smooth relationships among the parts that make the system work.

Time for learning new skills is hard to find in a world of continuous change and constant pressure, but leaders must take such time for themselves in order to be able to find it for their workers. Thinking about the problems the system faces, rather than one's individual problems, is a good way to start. What skills are required to cope with that problem?

Who has those skills, or where can they be learned? Create a path that begins with the end you want to achieve and works backward from there to determine the work and the resources needed.

Case Studies in the Use of Organizational Development Tools

The tool details four case studies in which organizational development tools were found useful.

1. Building a Shared Vision and Setting Priorities: A New Leader's Story

Taking over an overworked, beleaguered agency struggling with big backlogs, enormous delays, missing records, and burned-out but dedicated staff people, a new manager used a series of visioning meetings to create guiding principles and goal priorities that led to a new sense of unity, team spirit, and energy.

2. Building Effective Working Alliances: A Program Manager's Story

After agreeing upon a vision and priorities, agency leaders and employees had to take on tough discussions about responsibilities, authority, commitments, and follow-through in order to stop blaming and buck-passing, overcome personal histories and make their plans a reality. *Responsibility charting* helped them clarify and negotiate job tasks, dividing responsibilities and better using each others knowledge and abilities. *Role negotiation* allowed them to give and receive feedback across both lines of authority and fields of action without casting blame.

3. Getting Task Forces Started: A State Director's Point of View

Authorized to determine what was possible and make it happen, a task force on reforming the child welfare system bogged down over budgetary turf, undefined goals, and issues of departmental authority and accountability. The state director brought in Responsibility Charting to negotiate consensus, evaluate needs, and define the boundaries of the work.

4. Creating a Framework for Managing Projects: A Mid-Level Manager's Viewpoint

A manager of a project to reduce intake time found that various groups were involved but had little contact with each other beyond a history of stalled plans and constant reorganizations. Beginning with the end goals on the table, team members identified and ranked the tasks needed to achieve the desired outcomes. They set milestone deadlines and drew a map of all stakeholders, bringing crucial ones to a structured series of meetings that allowed maximum communication and showed progress in a regular cycle.