

## **LEARNING LEADERSHIP IN A CLIMATE OF CHANGE**

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What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. --  
Oliver Wendall Holmes.

Sonoma County Children's Home serves children infant through 18 years old who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected. Our work to help these children transition back home, to a foster home, or to a group home placement. We work closely with social workers, mental health professionals, foster parents, educators, and public health professionals to meet and assess the needs of these children.

In June of 1993, our Children's Home was faced with an elimination of the Juvenile Director's position as a budget cut. Danna Fabella, Deputy Director of Services, was assigned to provide administrative support to me, assigned Program Manager of the Children's Home.

This budgetary action created an angry fearful staff climate. They were fearful for their jobs -- thinking, who is next? They questioned why the cut was made to the Board of Supervisors, the Grand Jury, and the Civil Service Commission.

The Welfare League of America was asked to do a study of the Children's Home by our Director, Yolanda Rinaldo.

Administration believed that the Children's Home was a good program. We set out to strengthen our Supervisorial Team so they could support and guide others. A mediator was provided with an all-staff retreat to help staff process the elimination of the juvenile institutions's director. The Human Services Director, Yolanda Rinaldo, attended the retreat as an active participant. Yolanda let staff know that her goal was to integrate the Children's Home into the Human Services Department and to commit resources to the front-line staff where help to children occurs.

Our direction from the Welfare League study was to consider our work schedules. They were found to be inconsistent with the needs of the institution for shift change, and some schedules were made up of too long shifts, some 14 hours. Our Supervisorial Team started looking at guidelines for a schedule change that would promote shift change, training, interagency collaboration, assessment, review, consistent overview of program and children. Our goal was to remove barriers to performance and to create a climate where every staff member will be a part of the whole institution, knowledgeable about every aspect of service provided.

We presented the guidelines that the supervisors and management had agreed upon to the line staff. We asked questions about what would be the ideal. How can we provide overlap for training, all-staff review, and all around job sharing of responsibility? How could we offer access to outside experts to all front line staff? We asked for staff to come up with schedule drafts to be considered.

In November, Danna Fabella accepted a position as Assistant Welfare Director of Contra Costa County. I requested she be my mentor for my internship. Danna Fabella, Deputy Welfare

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Director, assigned Linda Cannon, Division Manager, to work with me around my internship. Linda and I met on March 26 in Contra Costa at the Antioch office. We discussed my home office history and what my goals were for my internship. I wanted to get a broader understanding of Child Welfare Services from initial intake to placement, adoption, or return home. I also had a keen interest in their Independent Living Skills Program, Jobs R Us. On Monday and Tuesday until May 9, I would intern in Contra Costa.

I am very fortunate to be able to attend the Administrative Team meetings every Tuesday in Contra Costa. Danna was always prepared with an agenda. At the beginning of each meeting, she assessed the importance of agenda items, scheduled time for staff to attend (for those who only need be present for part of the meeting), and deleted items which could be carried over to a later date. Every person present was presented with copies of relevant materials. Each manager was prepared with notes specific to their agenda items.

Linda set up schedules for me to meet with the Children's Services Administrative Team, supervisors, and line workers from Intake and Placement. I also was scheduled meetings with the Independent Living Skills coordinators and would attend the Child Welfare League of America's Training Workshop.

My internship has been an exceptional experience for me. I have been welcomed into every phase of the Contra Costa Social Service Agency. Judges, supervisors, administration, line staff, and community members have been most helpful in guiding, answering questions, filling me full with information. They were curious, too, about who I was, and I felt mutually respected for information I shared about my home county. My internship led me to the quest of leadership skills--fine tuning and building on where I came from. One particular meeting was with the Administrative Team and the Juvenile Court Judge. The dilemma from the Social Service Department perspective is the different roles each department has in the protection of children.

The department has opposed the imposition of the proposed local rule of court believing that it restricts the ability to provide services to families and to meet the requirements of state regulations and child abuse reporting laws. In this meeting in the Juvenile Court chambers, Danna Fabella clearly defined the dilemma. The information shared was knowledge based and driven by the values carefully thought about and internalized. The social worker responsibilities are to first assess the protective needs of the child. The attorney of the parent is to protect the client's rights--the client is the parent.

Another meeting I attended in Contra Costa Judge's chambers was with two family welfare researchers from Berkeley, community members, foster parents, lawyers, judges, and administrative team members. The presentation was prepared in collaborative efforts with the Grand Jury. The question asked was what is needed to strengthen adoption in Contra Costa County. The study looked at what is going on for young people coming into care. The study recommends that within the first thirty days the child comes into care that a look at the family be taken to evaluate their strengths with prognosis indicators. Research has found that poor prognosis are stronger indicators than strengths. They believe that two plans must be developed for every child entering foster care: A. reunification, B. adoption. Full disclosure to the parent that they are implementing plan B. This would call for very good case planning. The parents

need to understand if they do not follow through and complete case plan A, plan B will be started. The recruitment of families who will follow both plans is crucial. In the study, it shows variations from county to county, but a common piece is the communication between parent, foster parent, and social worker. Within the first thirty days, the decision must be made for a foster/adopt home. Training is needed for both social workers and foster parents. There must be a shared philosophy among Juvenile Court, lawyers, and Social Service Department understanding the goals with clear communication.

During my internship, I attended the Child Welfare League of America's Training Workshop. It was held at the John Muir Inn in Martinez. In this training, participants reviewed adolescent development issues and explored societal perspectives. We looked at the impact of these perspectives in the healthy development of youth. As participants, we studied about positive youth development approach to working with young people and its underlining philosophy, premises and proactive guidelines. We talked a lot about the values, attitudes, and competencies that workers need to make the positive youth development approach work.

Returning back to my home county to the tasks at hand, what will I bring back from my experience in Contra Costa County?

I have learned that leading successful meetings is an art. It is the arena for effective change to take place. One really important point for me to remember is I am not a one-person show. Encouraging all members to be active participants, part of the process, very importantly, part of the solutions

At Valley of the Moon Children's Home, our schedule change is starting June 6. We will be having weekly all-staff meetings, two hours in duration. We will be discussing agenda items from staff and also providing staff in-service trainings. For the first two months, we will focus on the institutional program and policies. This will be a review of what we offer as an institution, our roles as professional child care providers. We will evaluate what areas we need to strengthen. In August we will have presentations from the Child Welfare Chief and his supervisors to give an overview of Child Welfare Services. Our goal is for the Children's Home staff to see their role in the Human Services Department and to become familiar being a part of these services. I want to bring back what I learned to the Children's Home staff. The experience will be similar except it will be within our own county.

Judges, lawyers, Mental Health, police, community based upon organizations, Public Health, educators all professionals who work with our children are important to our success. Representatives of all these professionals will be invited to address and train our staff. We must be knowledgeable and respectful of each other to proactively make a difference for the children we serve. Working together, opening communication, and understanding is a key. The weekly all-staff meetings will open doors to Valley of the Moon staff that have not been nurtured. We will continually evaluate the effectiveness of the weekly meetings to monitor and make changes when necessary.

My internship has helped me put into perspective the Grand Jury Reports, Civil Service Reviews, and community concern. These are common bodies not unique to my home county. As a

manager in Child Welfare, I will work to educate and be proactive in communications with all groups. This will help us work together to meet the needs of children.

Feedback is very important, especially in a short-term facility. Feedback from concerned groups helps us make necessary adjustments in the way we do business so that all are satisfied.

The training I attended with the Welfare League of America has made me look at how can I include and give a voice to the children we serve at the Children's Home. Children are more likely to benefit from their stay at the home if they are comfortable, happy, and satisfied with the life there.

Some ideas are as follows:

1. Include youth in our program evaluation.
2. Have a suggestion box for the children.
3. Engage community members to respond to critical issues our children raise.
4. Interview each child as he or she leaves the Children's Home. During these interviews, each child be asked if he or she was mistreated by staff or others. Each child be also asked to express his or her opinion about the supportiveness of Youth Supervisor staff or others. These questions can provide important information about the atmosphere in the Children's Home.

These are new to the Children's Home including the child in evaluation of staff or program. I will introduce the idea with a training on children's rights and issues brought up in the Welfare League training I attended.

I look forward to the next year of change at the Valley of the Moon Children's Home. I am dedicated to making it the best place for children. I will not do it alone. Change has forced me to grow in many ways. I am renewed with vigor and vitality knowing we make a difference in the lives of the children we serve and that we will even do it better together.