Building Organizational Supports for Knowledge Sharing in County Human Service Organizations: A Cross-Case Analysis of Works-in-Progress

Chris Lee and Michael J. Austin

ABSTRACT

Building on the literature related to evidence-based practice, knowledge management, and learning organizations, this cross-case analysis presents twelve works-in-progress in ten local public human service organizations seeking to develop their own knowledge sharing systems. The data for this cross-case analysis can be found in the various contributions to this Special Issue. Ybe findings feature the developmental aspects of building a learning organization that include knowledge sharing systems featuring transparency, self-assessment, and dissemination and utilization. Implications for practice focus on the structure and processes involved in building knowledge sharing teams inside public human service organizations.

KEYWORDS: Evidence-based practice; evidence-informed practice; human service organization; learning organization; knowledge sharing

Introduction

As standards for accountability and service outcomes are increasingly more common in public human services, the question of how to effectively incorporate the management of data and knowledge into daily practice becomes progressively more relevant. While human service organizations might aim to inform their practice with administrative data and relevant research, the greatest challenge relates to identifying ways of systematically incorporating such information in the midst of work overload and limited resources.

The purpose of this analysis is to illustrate and explore this vety challenge: What is a knowledge sharing system; what does it look like? What sorts of barriers do public human service organizations face in terms of collecting, analyzing, and utilizing administrative data? In what ways are public human service organizations systematically integrating new evidence and knowledge into their daily service provision? What do these integrating processes look like and how might others learn from them?

Building on the work of previous authors, the authors begin with a brief review of the literature around evidence-based practice, knowledge management, and knowledge sharing, exploring how each of these concepts are defined and what factors may inhibit or facilitate these processes (Austin, 2008; Austin & Claassen, 2008; Austin, Claassen, Vu, & Mizrahi, 2008; Johnson & Austin, 2008; Lemon Osterling & Austin, 2008). The authors also review the concept of a learning organization and how it provides a context for facilitating the sharing of knowledge. Twelve case examples that capture "works in progress" are then examined, reflecting the experiences of 10 local public human service organizations in developing their own knowledge sharing systems. The authors conclude with future directions for developing systems of knowledge sharing and integrating evidence-informed decision making practices in public human service organizations.

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Brief Literature Review

Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Practice

The concept of *evidence-based* practice was first introduced in the field of medicine, defined as "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individuals" (Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997). More current definitions of evidence-based practice also include the involvement of clients as informed participants in the decision-making process (Gambrill, 1999). Identifying and locating appropriate evidence on which to base practice, however, proves to be challenging (Gambrill, 1999). Evidence-based practice relies heavily on systematic reviews of evidence resulting from Randomized Control Trials (RCTs); conversely, *evidence-informed* practice allows for the utilization of a wider range of data and evidence (Austin, 2008). For example, most traditional evidence is found in the published research literature (e.g., findings from empirical research studies or synthesized reviews of research). However, often overlooked and less utilized is data and evidence created from the experiences of service users, professional practitioners, administrators, and contributions of policy makers (Johnson & Austin, 2008). Accordingly, evidence-informed practice emphasizes the incorporation of these less traditional forms of evidence, broadening the scope from which practitioners have to apply evidence in practice.

Not surprisingly, difficulty in identifying appropriate evidence on which to base practice has led to a limited number of evidence-based models available for practice in public human services, though they are more prolific in the fields of mental health and health care (Austin, 2008). There are beginning efforts to remedy the situation in human services, such as the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), which identifies evidence-based practice models in public child welfare. The CEBC reviews child welfare interventions that have been scientifically researched, synthesizes the evidence, and makes this information publicly available by posting it online. A large gap remains, however, between the practical needs of practitioners and the availability of explicitly documented evidence-based practice models. Broadening the range of evidence used to inform practice, as in the case of evidence-informed practice, helps to close this gap and apply information gleaned from daily practice such as case documentation of changing client needs or administrative data collected as part of an agency's information system.

The inclusive nature of evidence-informed practice, however, can quickly lead to an underutilized, overabundance of data and evidence-with no systematic structure in place to efficiently and effectively integrate the information. Organizational supports are needed to facilitate the sharing and managing of knowledge among staff in the organization (Austin et al., 2008). First introduced in the for-profit sector and distinguishing between data, information, and knowledge (Davenport & Pmsak, 2000), knowledge management involves the following six elements (Awad & Ghaziri, 2004):

1. Utilizing accessible knowledge (derived from inside or outside sources),
2. Embedding and storing knowledge,
3. Representing knowledge in accessible formats (e.g., databases),
4. Promoting the cultivation of knowledge,
5. Transferring and openly sharing knowledge, and
6. Assessing the value and impact of knowledge assets.

Furthermore, organizational knowledge can be both tacit and explicit (Nonaka, 1994). Tacit knowledge is implicit, displayed through workers' actions and decisions but not easily communicated or explained (Nonaka, 1994). Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is more readily processed, shared, and stored and may take such forms as organizational manuals or information relayed through staff training (Austin et al., 2008). Both tacit and explicit knowledge can be found in the experiences of service users, care providers, and professional practitioners as well as organizational and policy documents (Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, & Barnes, 2003).

Identifying sources of evidence is only the first step toward realizing evidence-informed practice and effective knowledge management. The next step recognizes the role that organizational culture plays in supporting or discouraging practitioners to integrate evidence into their practice. Successful implementation of evidence-informed practice is largely contingent on having a supportive organizational environment that involves all levels of the organization from line workers to upper management (Barwick et al., 2005; Lawler & Bilson, 2004). Some of the specific characteristics of an organizational culture that supports evidence-informed practice include: investment from all levels of leadership (e.g., both middle and top management), active involvement of stakeholders, cohesive teamwork, accessibility of organizational resources, and a readiness to learn by the organization (Barwick et al., 2005). Other

factors related to the success or failure of evidence-informed practice includes the attitudes, practices, and behaviors of staff (Hodson, 2003).

In addition to identifying the organizational factors that support evidence-informed practice, promoting the dissemination and utilization of data is equally important. *Dissemination* of evidence involves knowledge sharing activities, while the *utilization* of evidence relates to the different ways that knowledge can be applied to practice (Gira, Kessler, & Poett ner, 2004; Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, & Abelson, 2003). The dissemination and utilization of evidence is impacted by both individual and organizational factors as well as characteristics of the research evidence itself (Lemon Osterling & Austin, 2008). At the individual level, there may be both barriers (e.g., lack of awareness of research) and facilitators (background in research methods) to the dissemination and utilization of knowledge.

Similarly, at the organizational level, factors such as unsupportive staff and management may act as barriers, while in-service trainings promoting the use of evidence in practice settings may act as facilitators (Carroll et al., 1997; Kajermo, Nordstrom, Krusebrant, & Bjorvell, 1998, Barratt, 2003; Humphris, Littlejohns, Victor, O'Halloran, & Peacock, 2000). The timing, nature, and relevance of research evidence can also affect its dissemination and utilization (Beyer & Trice, 1982). For example, research that is seen as conflicting or confusing, not applicable to a particular practice setting, or irrelevant to client needs will most likely not be incorporated into practice (Barratt, 2003; Hoagwood, Burns, Kiser, Ringeisen, & Schoenwald, 2001; McCleary & Brown, 2003).

Elements of a Learning Organization

Ultimately, regularly incorporating evidence-based and evidence-informed practice into daily service provision can lead to an organization engaged in an overall culture of learning and knowledge sharing. According to Garvin (2000), a learning organization is characterized by five functions. The first function—information gathering and problem solving—refers to putting in place the structural foundation needed to create a culture of learning. For example, these activities might include defining a locally-relevant learning culture, demonstrating learning processes, and personally investing in learning. Next, a learning organization engages in experimentation—searching for new and better ways to improve organizational operations. A learning organization also learns from the past, by gathering prior reports and tacit knowledge of senior staff; placing

present realities on trend lines from the past; conducting after-action reviews from lessons learned; and engaging in small-scale research and demonstration projects. In addition to learning from the past, being aware of current best/promising practices and how others address issues or implement ways to improve operations is also important. These practices may be identified both inside and outside the agency, and then adapted to meet local needs. Finally, learning organizations facilitate the transferring of knowledge by sharing relevant literature, using staff meetings to share recent learning, and establishing other sharing mechanisms such as journal clubs or brown-bag lunch discussions.

Certain mechanisms in support of organizational learning can also help to facilitate the development of a learning organization, as noted by Lipshitz, Friedman, and Popper (2007). Specifically, while *individual learning* involves mental/cognitive processes (e.g., experience, observation, reflection, generalizations, experimentation), *organizational learning* involves social processes (e.g., beliefs, actions, outcomes, insights, dissemination). In order to provide a sense of psychological safety for staff to learn together, individual learning needs must be met in combination with organizational learning needs in order to transform changes into new organizational routines, operating procedures, and shared beliefs. A safe, learning environment provides a space in which staff may question, learn, and share their thoughts and ideas without being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive, and thereby make room for new ideas and changes. In essence, organizational learning involves creating trusting environments that allow staff to take risks and avoid defensiveness.

Similar to organizational learning, knowledge sharing relies heavily on the interactions between individuals within an organization. As noted above, the sharing of knowledge is a process by which individuals are able to convert their own knowledge into a form that can be understood, absorbed, and used by others. Knowledge sharing allows individuals to learn from one another as well as contribute to the organization's knowledge base. Knowledge sharing also promotes creativity and innovation as individuals collaborate together, circulate new ideas, and contribute to innovation and creativity in organizations.

Largely impacting the development or preclusion of a learning organization, organizational culture can also influence knowledge sharing-as illustrated in *Figure 1*, which depicts the overlapping aspects of: the nature of knowledge, opportunity structures, and motivations (Ipe, 2003). These three elements interact with one another in a non-linear

FIGURE 1
Knowledge Sharing between Individuals in Organizations

Source: Adapted from Ipe (2003)
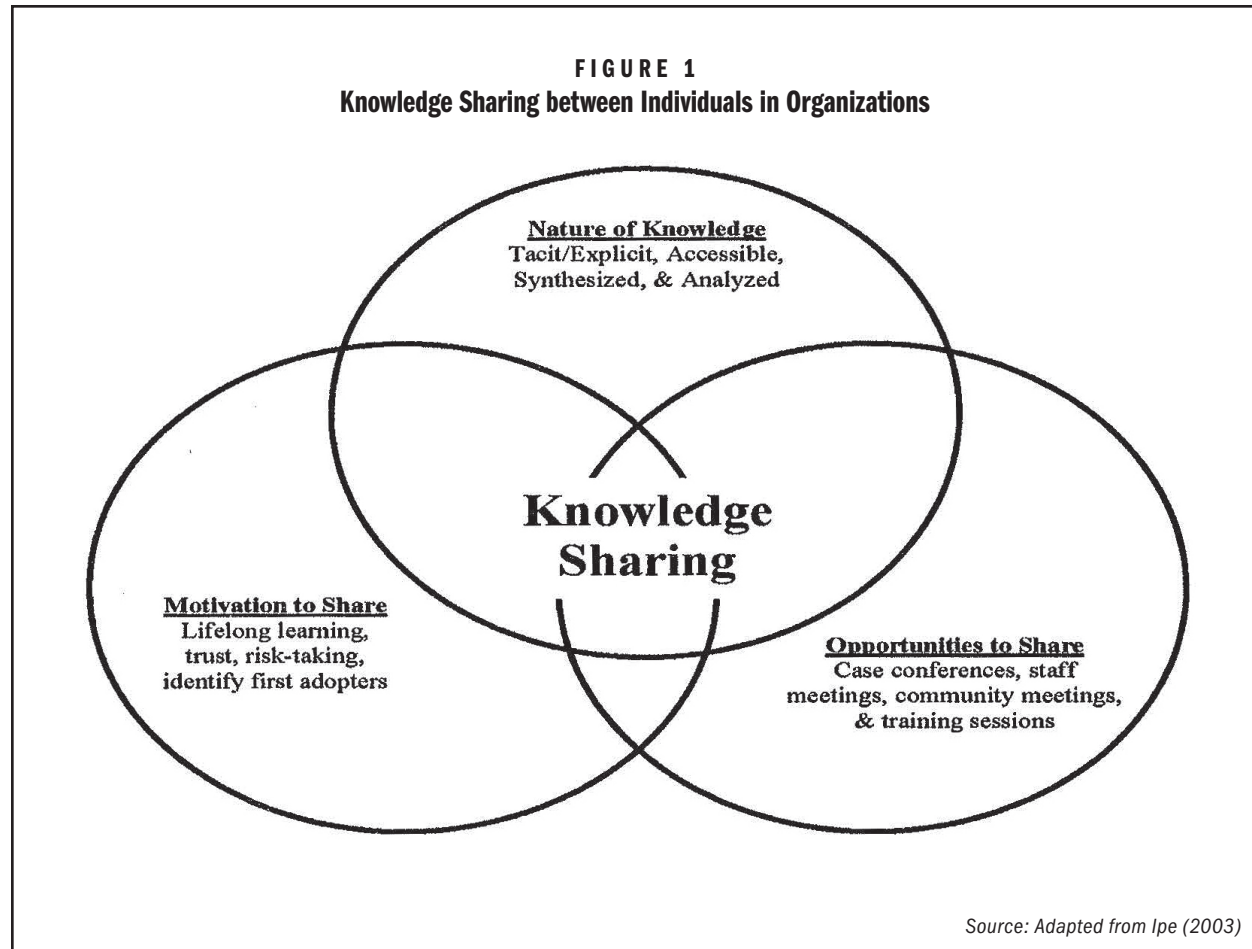
fashion to ultimately promote or inhibit the sharing of knowledge within an organization. Indeed, Ipe suggests that an organizational culture that is not supportive in any one of these three essential areas can limit or undermine effective knowledge sharing. Accordingly, this cross-case analysis was conducted to further explore the nature of knowledge creation, development of knowledge sharing structures, and motivation as they were encountered and implemented in real-life contexts. Results of this analysis are discussed further in the sections below.

Methodology

Case study research is particularly useful in acquiring a better understanding of a phenomenon as it occurs in its natural context, or providing insight into a theory in need of further substantiation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This method may focus in-depth on an individual experience or compare multiple experiences stemming from different situations, as in the case of cross-case analysis (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). For either mode of analysis, data may be gathered from various sources, including interviews, observations, or reviewing existing records and documents, and then synthesized to provide information pertaining to the research question of interest (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Stake, 1995). As effective knowledge sharing processes and mechanisms in human service organizations are not yet well understood, the cross-case analysis method was especially useful for this study of building knowledge sharing systems in public human service organizations (PHSO).

Each of the 12 case examples included in this analysis is the result of content review of agency documents, supplemented with face-to-face interviews conducted by three social work graduate research assistants. Interviews were conducted with senior social service staff from 10 Bay Area county human service organizations from May to September 2008, resulting in 12 case examples included in this analysis. Agency documents were provided by senior staff and reviewed and synthesized in addition to interview data. These individual case studies represent "baseline" information that will also be used in subsequent annual follow-up surveys and interviews. Preliminary results of these

FIGURE 2
Emerging Elements of Public Sector Learning Organizations
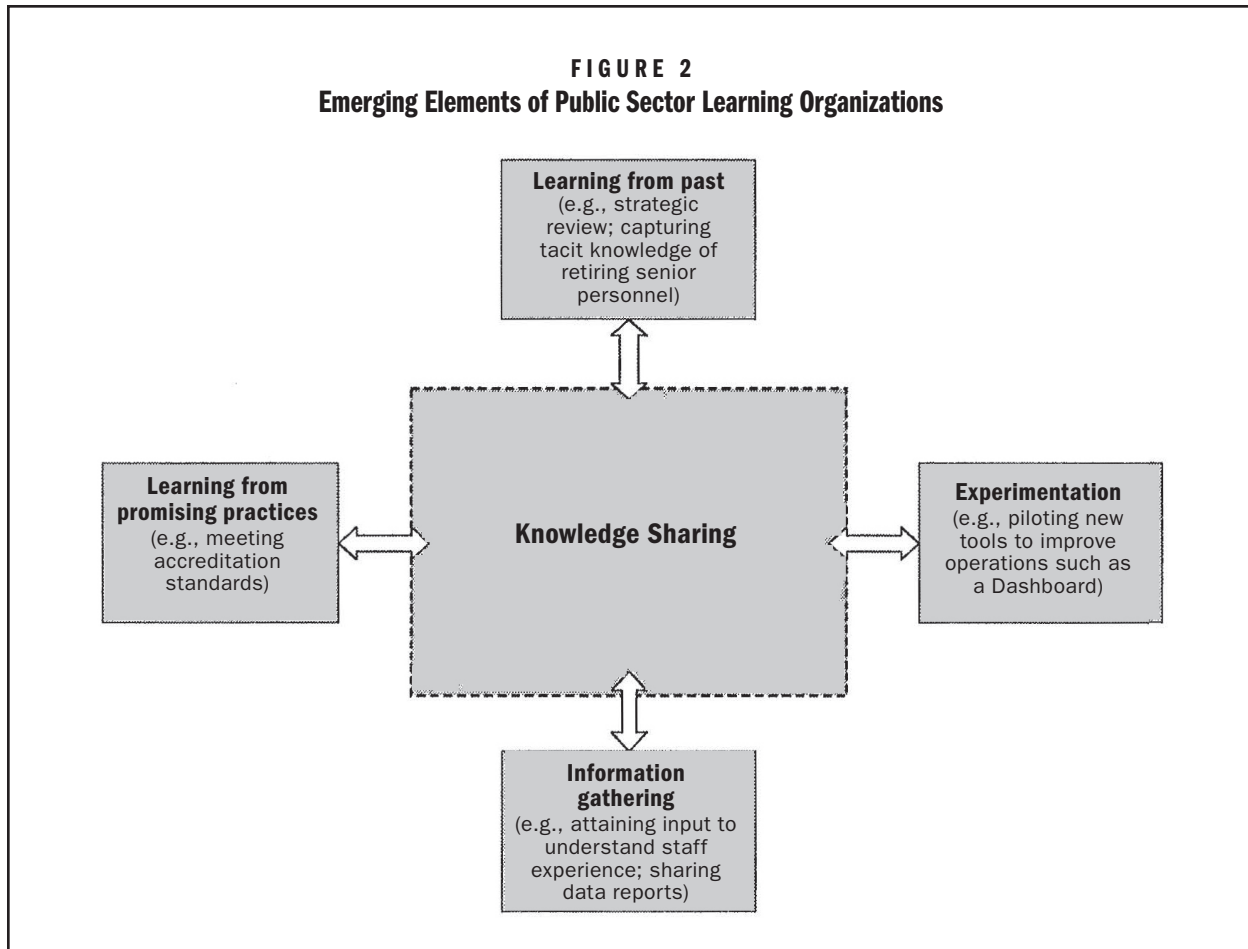
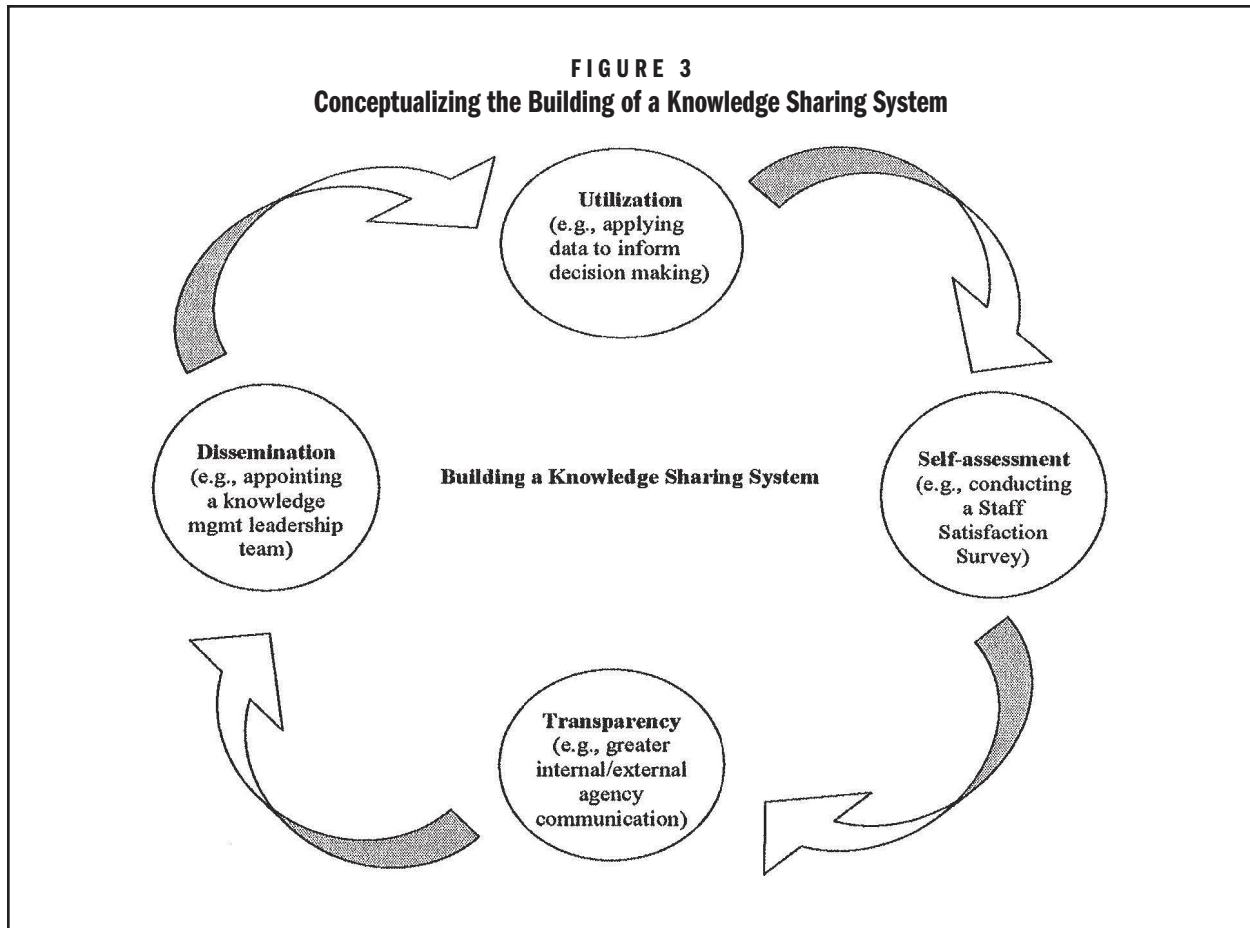baseline case examples are discussed in further detail in the section below.

Findings

DEVELOPMENT OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

In analyzing the 12 cases for common themes across organizational experiences, it became clear that while each of the 10 PHSOs are seeking to facilitate knowledge sharing processes, each agency is also uniquely incorporating different elements of a learning organization within their own organizational context. For example, several case examples captured processes of information gathering and analyzing through conducting staff surveys and interviews, and hiring personnel or creating new departmental units for managing data and evaluation tasks. Many agencies are also experimenting with new ideas and tools to improve information dissemination and utilization, such as implementing dashboards or other data management tools. Efforts to learn from the past are also common, as reflected in one organization's efforts to create multi-media tools for capturing the tacit knowledge of a retiring chief financial officer, and

another organization's strategic review of the agency's current operations and services. There are several examples of efforts to learn from promising practices, including learning about performance indicators and industry standards from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), or the use of a knowledge management matrix to develop and implement knowledge sharing strategies. And finally, all cases illustrate different aspects of knowledge sharing among different staff members, including via staff meetings or the distribution and discussion of data reports. *Figure 2* illustrates the elements of how PHSOs are evolving into learning organizations and how these elements facilitate and interact with other aspects of the organization to support ongoing learning.

In addition to strengthening their capacities as learning organizations, each of the 12 case examples illustrates the different ways that knowledge sharing can emerge in a public human service agency. Though the sharing and transferring of information is the most obvious motivation for developing a knowledge sharing system, the idea of "knowledge sharing" requires further conceptualization.

FIGURE 3
Conceptualizing the Building of a Knowledge Sharing System

Utilization
(e.g., applying data to inform decision making)

Self-assessment
(e.g., conducting a Staff Satisfaction Survey)

Building a Knowledge Sharing System

Dissemination
(e.g., appointing a knowledge mgmt leadership team)

Transparency
(e.g., greater internal/external agency communication)

Emerging from the cross-case analysis are themes that represent intermediary organizational level outcomes that can help to define an organization's larger knowledge sharing structure. These intermediaty outcomes include: transparency, self-assessment, and knowledge dissemination and utilization. *Figure 3* illustrates how each of these outcomes contributes to the development of a knowledge sharing system. While each of the intermediary outcomes may have their own goals, they also collectively promote a larger knowledge sharing system by building on and supporting one another. For example, an organization may conduct a self-assessment to identify major issues and challenges, then facilitate transparency by disseminating assessment findings among all levels of staff members, and then utilize the information by initiating discussion among all staff members to develop strategies for addressing agency challenges. Finally, after implementing one or more strategies for addressing agency issues, findings might be disseminated widely through use of meetings and reports, and perhaps motivate another agency-wide assessment to repeat the cycle and thereby institutionalize a culture of knowledge sharing across the organization.

Before discussing how these components were employed among the 10 PHSOs included in this cross-case analysis, an overview of definitions is needed. The first outcome, *transparency*, may be located within and outside of the agency. Specifically, it may involve the desire to increase horizontal transparency among similar level personnel (e.g., line worker to line worker), vertical transparency between personnel of different agency levels (e.g., line worker and manager), or transparency with members in the larger public community. Transparency can also provide greater clarity about existing agency data and thereby reduce/eliminate staff confusion and other barriers to integrating evidence into practice. The second outcome relates to *self-assessment* and reflects an organization's efforts to assess the current status of services and operations in order to learn and improve organizational performance. The third outcome area incorporates the ideas of knowledge or evidence *dissemination and utilization*. PHSOs collect an abundance of data for various reports and to meet legislative mandates, but often struggle to effectively utilize such data for decision making. The following section discusses these themes in more detail.

The Role of Transparency in a Knowledge Sharing System

Many PHSOs are engaged in activities related to increasing transparency. Efforts to increase transparency in order to develop structures for greater knowledge sharing include activities such as: encouraging more open and pro-active communication, greater discussion of topics previously given limited public attention, and encouraging greater interpersonal interaction and contact. For example, one agency concentrated efforts on strengthening two-way communication between different levels of executive members by increasing interpersonal contact (via more in-person meetings), and encouraging them to view their roles as more participatory and built on partnership. The same agency also increased transparency and encouraged greater inter action among various levels of staff members by opening up membership to an existing leadership team to allow any interested staff member to join, rather than limiting it to those in supervisory or management positions. An other case example includes developing and implementing division-specific action plans and reports for sharing with other staff members on a monthly basis. Similarly, another agency devised a central document as a means for providing regular updates on client information from all departments in order to increase cross-departmental communication, information sharing, and collaboration.

With regard to increasing transparency in the broader surrounding community, another PHSO proactively engaged the media in discussion around agency programs and services using informational brochures and formal presentations, news articles and editorials, and radio and TV interviews. Similarly, another agency employed their new research and evaluation manager to engage more with the larger community by communicating more publicly and regularly about the impact of their services and programs. These case examples display ways in which knowledge sharing systems need to account for increased transparency both within and outside of an organization.

The Role of Self-Assessment in a Knowledge Sharing System

Another theme emerging from the cases involves organizational self-assessment. Several of the case examples feature efforts to assess the status of agency operations and services in order to find ways to improve upon organizational performance. For example, one agency implemented an on line dashboard for data collecting, tracking, and/or reporting purposes. The dashboard is used as a mechanism for assessing service and/or program changes in a timely manner in order to increase the organization's capacity to address issues as they arise, and generate reports and status updates to the board of supervisors and other relevant stakeholders. Another PHSO used a staff satisfaction survey to gather responses from all levels of staff regarding their experiences and perspectives on the agency's strategic plan, supervisory structure, information sharing practices, and opportunities for affecting organizational decisions. Results of the survey were used to highlight areas in need of improvement and inform the development of future steps.

Another illustration of organizational self-assessment can be found in two case examples. One PHSO utilized the accreditation process as an opportunity to assess their operations using national standards to identify the areas that were in need of support and improvement. The accreditation process helped to renew staff interest in quality improvement and generated greater ownership of agency performance. By gathering input from various staff members as well as external stakeholders, another PHSO conducted a strategic review of agency operations and services in order to assess what areas were doing well, what areas were not, and identified opportunities for greater data utilization and service improvement. Such a strategic review provides a foundation for increasing the use of evidence-informed practice and engaging in more effective knowledge sharing.

The Role of Dissemination and Utilization in a Knowledge Sharing System

Several of the case examples illustrate a natural progression toward developing a system for greater knowledge sharing that involves more effective and efficient *dissemination and utilization* of knowledge. For example, one agency designated a new staff role to provide for the interpretation and communication of data in order to facilitate easier use of this information by staff. The new role quickly led to the development of a knowledge management leadership team that identified responsibilities, strategic priorities, and standardized decision making in four designated knowledge areas. Another PHSO appointed a new senior management position to build structures and facilitate processes in support of knowledge management by developing a knowledge management matrix that identifies uniform areas for departmental reporting. In this way staff are able to learn from each other and stay current on the status of agency operations and service issues.

Also related to dissemination and utilization, one agency sought to develop ways for capturing the tacit

knowledge of a well-known and respected retiring chief financial officer. With expertise in several areas of service, the PHSO was concerned with the large gap that would be left without the resource of this senior manager's abundance of valuable practice wisdom and experience. Though the project required devotion of large amounts of time and energy, the agency devised several tools that may now be used online by future employees to utilize the senior manager's previously tacit knowledge (e.g., a video/audio slideshow of the director's training sessions, Power Point presentation slides, knowledge maps, process flow charts, and process narratives).

Conclusion

The results from this cross-case analysis of 12 "works in progress" reveal that public human service mganizations are pursuing unique and innovative ways to effectively and efficiently incorporate evidence into eveıyday practice and service provision. Agencies are also committed to and focused on developing their work environments into learning organizations, even amidst high stress conditions—as seen in the case examples evidencing several elements comprising an organizational learning environment. Moreover, the case examples depict ways to conceptualize the development of a knowledge sharing system for implementation in the context of daily practice. The concrete outcomes that agencies sought to achieve regarding the sharing and transfer of knowledge include: increasing transparency inside and outside the agency; learning from agency self-assessment; and increasing the dissemination and utilization of data and evidence. While only specific examples are highlighted in this analysis, all agencies are clearly engaged at some level in increasing transparency, learning from self-assessment, and strategically applying the benefits of capturing, disseminating, and utilizing knowledge. And despite increasing workloads and decreasing budgets, human service agencies are engaging in increasingly resourceful and innovative ways to effectively and efficiently utilize various forms of evidence to inform practice.
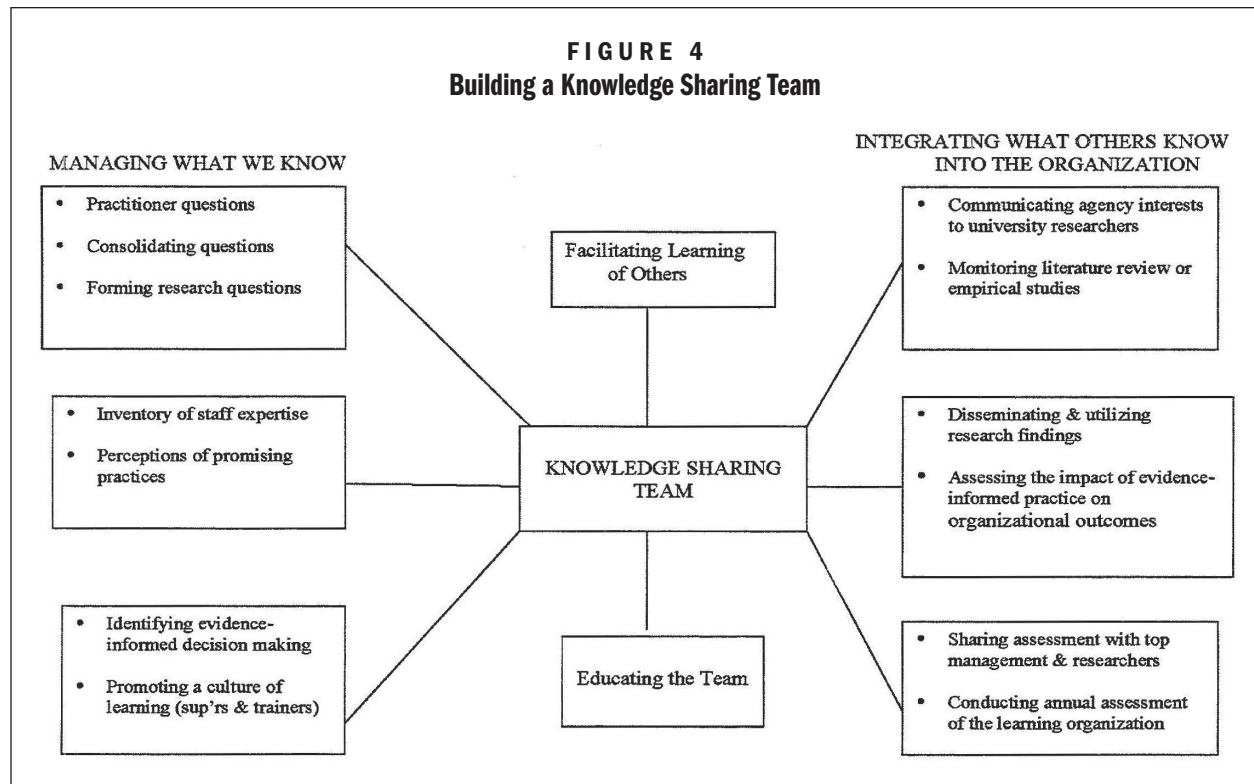
Implications for Practice

While there is a growing interest in developing organizational structures for sharing and transferring knowledge, it is less clear how to implement knowledge sharing in public human service organizations. These works in progress help to address this issue by illustrating intermediary outcomes that are helpful in building an infrastructure for promoting knowledge sharing and utilization at the system level.

Many of these cases illustrate the creation of organizational supports for more open communication in order to increase transparency both within and across agency boundaries. Consistent with the principles of a learning organization, the organizational tools of self-assessment are being used to evaluate agency operations, strengths, and weaknesses to help management create greater effectiveness, and efficiency in working toward change. Finally, using technology to promote knowledge dissemination and utilization can encourage staff to remain informed so that they may, in turn, inform their daily practice when working with clients.

In many of these knowledge sharing cases, these intermediaıy outcomes were used to begin the process of building organizational supports for knowledge sharing. They involved senior managers who recognize the merits of creating a learning organization and supported the building of cross-departmental relationships in the form of knowledge sharing teams. These teams developed their own shared understanding of a learning organization, the mechanisms needed to foster shared learning, and the key elements of knowledge sharing. All these cases can serve as important examples for increasing our understanding of the knowledge sharing process of a learning organization.

Structure and Processes of a Knowledge Sharing Team

Based on an understanding of the learning organizations and the mechanisms of organizational learning, human service organizations can learn from this cross-case analysis and the related case studies if they have an internal structure to process this type of information. The simplest structure is a group of senior managers that can begin the process of knowledge sharing as a way of modeling the process, ultimately, for the entire organization. As noted in *Figure 4*, the structure and process features the processing of internal information (e.g., administrative data) and external information (e.g., research reports and/or descriptions of promising practices). The internal information is referred to as "what we know" since it is related to the explicit information in agency documents and the tacit knowledge held in the memory and experiences of staff. It also includes the compiling of an inventory of staff competencies as well as questions emerging from practice based on learning more about "what works" in other agencies. The external information relates to efforts by human service organizations to connect with local and regional universities in terms of linking faculty expertise to organizational priorities in the form of literature review and/or practice research.

FIGURE 4
Building a Knowledge Sharing Team

In summary, the implications for practice that can be derived from this cross-case analysis of knowledge sharing cases include a reaffirmation of the importance of transforming human service organizations into learning organizations, the understanding of organizational learning and knowledge sharing, and developing the structures and processes to build an organization's knowledge sharing systems to support the use of evidence-informed practice.

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