

**Developing a Learning Organization through Culture Shift and Data:**  
**The City and County of San Francisco Jurisdictional Change Initiative**

**John T. Tran**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

To adequately adjust to the increasing complexity of child welfare, it is imperative for child welfare agencies to create a learning organization—one that proactively cultivates the learning of its workforce to meet the needs of clients. However, a learning organization is only effective when it is supported by an organizational culture that is “just” and driven by data. Over the past several years, the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency, Department of Family and Children’s Services has been paralleling two efforts to create a learning organization to improve outcomes for children and families. These include (1) implementing the county-wide cultural reform, known as *Just Culture*, to foster a fair and consistent organization, and (2) using Continuous Quality Improvement as a framework to promote data.

This case study examines the San Francisco Jurisdictional Change Initiative efforts and its impact on improving outcomes, in relation to the existing efforts at the Department of Family and Children’s Services (DFCS). Overall, to create a strong, learning organization, it is recommended for the DFCS to integrate efforts relating to *Just Culture* and Continuous Quality Improvement, while leveraging existing resources to implement several aspects of the San Francisco Jurisdictional Change Initiative.

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## **Introduction**

Ensuring safety, permanency and well-being for children and families is the unequivocal goal for all county child welfare agencies. To achieve this feat, organizations must have the capacity to effectively implement necessary changes. However, in the field of child welfare, the complexity of the work, coupled with change resistance, pose significant barriers for agencies to successfully implement change. To overcome this challenge, child welfare agencies must create a learning organization that is built upon a culture of trust and fairness while using data to support prevailing practice models. By effectively developing a learning organization, supported by a “just” and data-driven culture, child welfare agencies will enable their workforce to nimbly respond to current and future challenges.

## **Background**

Over the past years, the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency, Department of Family and Children’s Services (DFCS) has devoted much of its time, resources and efforts to create a learning organization, supported by *Just Culture* and the use of data through Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).

## ***Just Culture***

In 2009, the County Executive Office (CEO) of Santa Clara County began implementing the *Strategic Approach to Organizational Transformation*. An essential component of this organizational transformation strategy involves fostering a learning organization to help the county workforce effectively respond to current and future opportunities and challenges. The CEO implemented a cultural reform known as *Just Culture*—the quintessential organizational culture that fosters trust among employees, ensures fairness when addressing mistakes and implements systems and processes designed to support the work of staff while encouraging accountability (Santa Clara County CEO Launches New Reform Webpage, 2013). An organization supported by *Just Culture* is “fair and consistent, which allows for improvements in the organization that lead to better outcomes” (Just Culture at the County of Santa Clara, 2015).

Because *Just Culture* is an organizational culture shift for the county, it is still a work in progress for many agencies and departments, including the DFCS. According to an evaluation conducted in 2016—comprised of “listening circles” facilitated by a consultant with staff across different bureaus—there is a low level of trust, fairness and confidence in the systems, processes and leadership at the DFCS. Based on these findings, the DFCS is currently holding several strategic visioning sessions with managers and supervisors to strategize short and long-term goals to improve the organizational foundation to align with *Just Culture*.

## ***Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)***

Although Santa Clara County is data rich, it has not had a consistent process to utilize data to inform change. As such, the DFCS is currently using the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process as a framework to transform the organizational culture towards becoming data-

driven. CQI is an ongoing process for improvement that enables an organization to evaluate its strengths and challenges, make decisions on how to address those challenges, and evaluate implementation progress. Based on this framework, in 2016, the DFCS began the process of mapping core services and identifying key decision points within the DFCS as well as developing CQI infrastructures to improve the work and outcomes for children and families in Santa Clara County.

While *Just Culture* and CQI aim to create a learning organization, it often appears to be treated as separate rather than complementing components. An effective learning organization requires a thoughtful integration of these two efforts.

#### **National Child Welfare Workforce Institute—Workforce Excellence Initiative**

Similar to the DFCS, the City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency (SF-HSA), Family and Children Services (FCS) experienced a history of challenges relating to organizational culture. With a change in leadership during 2013, there was a strong desire to maintain an effective workforce by fostering an environment of “accountability, learning, and innovation” (B. Johnson, email interview, April 19, 2017). To this effect, SF-HSA FCS strived to transform its organizational culture to become more “data-driven, performance-oriented, and team-based” (B. Johnson, email interview, April 19, 2017).

As a result, in 2014, the SF-HSA FCS applied for and was awarded the Children’s Bureau, National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) Workforce Excellence (WE) Initiative three-year partnership grant. The goal of the WE Initiative is to assist organizations in developing “proactive, strategic, collaborative, and sustainable initiatives designed to address critical workforce challenges through implementation of leadership academies for supervisors

and managers and organizational interventions” (Workforce Excellence and Organizational Intervention).

### ***Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA)***

As part of the WE Initiative, in July 2014, NCWWI conducted a Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) of the SF-HSA FCS to identify the strengths and challenges of the organization. The assessment was comprised of both quantitative data analysis (online survey with staff and focus groups) and qualitative data analysis (interviews with directors, managers, supervisors and caseworkers). Results from the COHA revealed several challenges in the organizational culture of SF-HSA FCS, specifically in the areas relating to “leadership, communication, and readiness for change” (NCWWI, 2014).

To support a data-driven process, the COHA is currently being utilized to advance and integrate a number of key initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for children and families. These key initiatives include the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative, which is the overarching agency-wide guide for change, as well as individual change initiatives and Site-Based Teams, which are complementary change efforts that align with the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative.

### ***San Francisco Jurisdictional Change Initiative***

Results from the COHA highlighted the frustration of staff regarding the lack of coordination and linkages between simultaneous changes that were being implemented. To address this concern, the leadership team from the SF-HSA FCS, in partnership with the University of California Berkeley (UC Berkeley) School of Social Welfare and Seneca Family of Agencies—San Francisco, established a comprehensive “San Francisco Jurisdictional Change Initiative.” The San Francisco (SF) Jurisdictional Change Initiative provides the foundation to affirm an

organizational culture shift to become more “data-informed, team-based, and performance-oriented.” This includes creating a theory of change and logic model to foster a process that supports the organizational culture shift (Quick Guide: San Francisco’s Jurisdictional Change Initiative). This overarching change initiative provides the basis to allow the agency to effectively implement any major changes to ultimately improve outcomes for children and families.

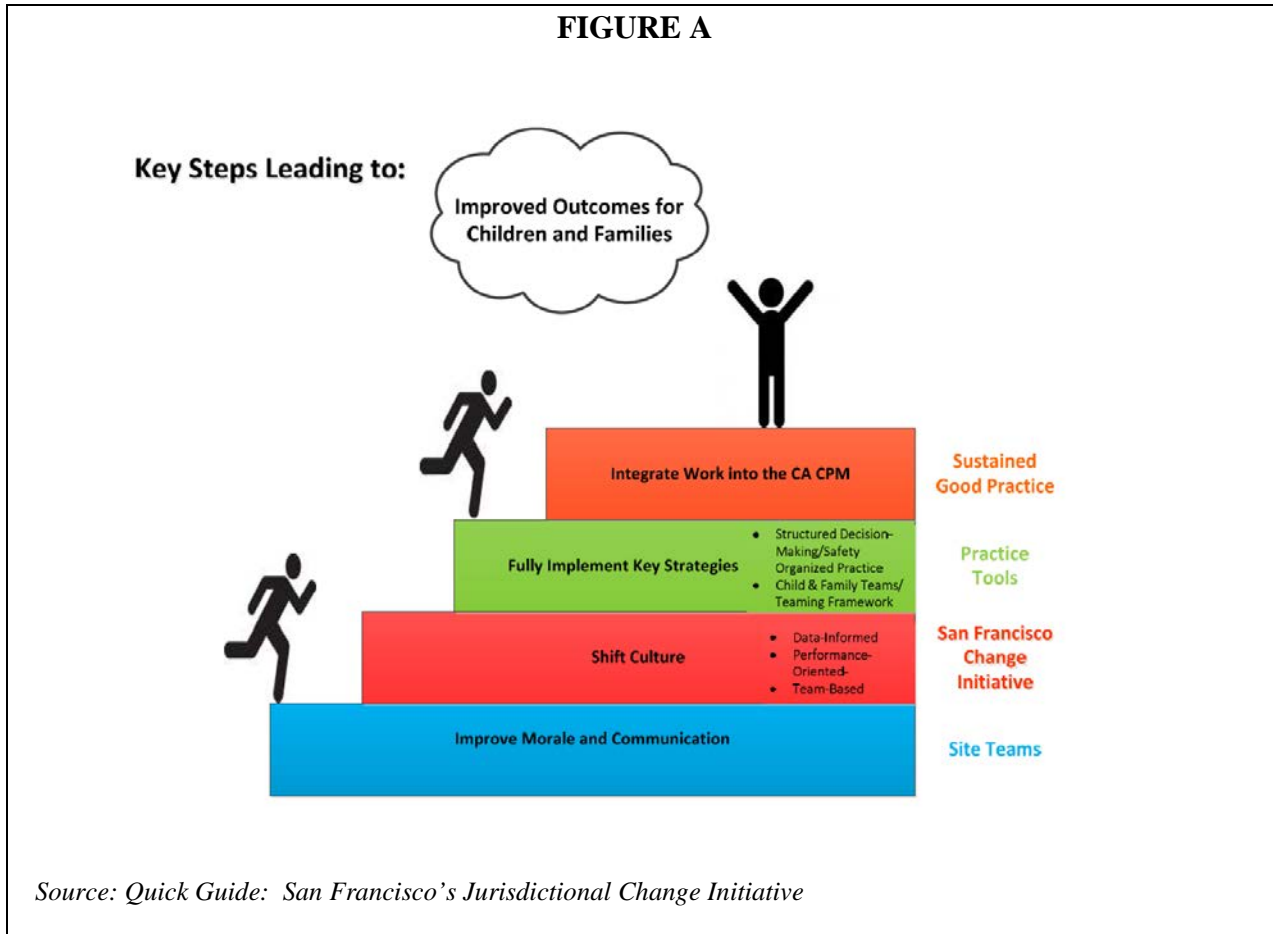
### ***Leadership Academies for Middle Managers and Supervisors***

As part of the WE Initiative, NCWWI also offers two leadership trainings for managers and supervisors—Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM) and Leadership Academy for Supervisors (LAS)—to enhance their leadership skills. Managers and supervisors participating in these leadership academies develop the necessary skills to effectively lead and implement various individual change initiatives that support the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative. Additionally, supervisors attending the LAS are able to utilize their leadership skills to lead Site-Based Teams to address issues relating to morale and communication (NCWWI, 2014).

### **Key Steps Leading to Improved Outcomes for Children and Families**

The COHA conveys that “readiness to change” is an area of challenge for the agency. As such, the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative aims to transform the organizational culture to build “the overall capacity to implement any change effectively” (Quick Guide: San Francisco’s Jurisdictional Change Initiative). The SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative is an integral component in achieving improved outcomes as it provides the foundation for the agency to implement change effectively. Figure A illustrates the four key steps leading to improved outcomes for children and families, which includes the SF Change Jurisdictional Initiative

(Quick Guide: San Francisco’s Jurisdictional Change Initiative). A description and analysis of each key step is also provided.



***Step 1: Improving Morale and Communication through Site-Based Teams***

As illustrated in Figure A, the pathway to achieve better outcomes for children and families starts with improving morale and communication. These two issues were reflected in the COHA, and in response, the agency created three Site-Based Teams (one for each of its three sites) to involve and empower staff at all levels of the organization; team is led by a group of supervisors who are participating in the LAS. The teams hold monthly meetings that are facilitated by a consultant from NCWWI. These meetings allow participants to collaborate and develop ideas on improving

morale and communication. Without solidifying this foundational step, change will be difficult to implement.

### ***Step 2: Shifting the Organizational Culture through the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative***

Step 2 capitalizes on the work done in Step 1 to allow for the implementation of the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative to shift the organizational culture to be more data-driven, performance-oriented and team-based. As part of the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative, a theory of change and logic model was developed to guide the direction of the process. The SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative's Theory of Change asserts the following:

“If we change the *culture of the agency* to be more *data-informed, performance-oriented, and team-based*, then our services will become more responsive to families and children's needs, our staff at all levels will improve their services, and outcomes will improve” (Quick Guide: San Francisco's Jurisdictional Change Initiative).

The Logic Model provides a road map, comprised of inputs, activities and outputs that will lead to improved outcomes. Step 2 is critical because it paves the way for the SF-HSA FCS to effectively utilize practice tools to implement its key strategies in Step 3.

### ***Step 3: Implementing Key Strategies to Enhance Practice Tools***

To fully implement key strategies—such as Structured Decision Making, Safety Organized Practice and Child and Family Teams—several individual change initiatives are being led by Program Directors, Program Managers and Supervisors, who are participating in the leadership academies. The individual change initiatives are designed to align with the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative and focus on: (1) identifying program-specific solutions to enhance child



welfare practice tools; and, (2) developing and supporting the workforce. Like the SF Change Initiative, these change initiatives also include the development of a theory of change and logic model, as well as an implementation plan.

#### ***Step 4: Integrating Work into the Core Practice Model (CPM) to Sustain Good Practice***

The California Child Welfare Core Practice Model (CPM) guides the “practice, service delivery, and decision-making” of the SF-HSA FCS (Quick Guide: California Core Practice Model). Overall, all strategies, initiatives, efforts and practice must be integrated into the CPM. Using the COHA, the SF-HSA FCS developed a more effective implementation infrastructure, which includes an Implementation Team that supports various practice improvement initiatives to maintain model fidelity of the CPM.

#### **Successes**

Through correspondence with a few participants involved in the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative, several successes were identified. According to Program Director, Barrett Johnson, the SF-HSA FCS “has clearly embraced the concept of being data-informed, in that staff at all levels refer to data and integrate it into their thinking.” This is especially important because without staff buy-in, the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative would not be possible.

Furthermore, the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative has fostered a team-based culture that promotes involvement and inclusivity across all levels of the department, as well as with external partners. For example, Site-Based Teams, led by supervisors, are developing a series of ongoing activities to address the issues of morale and communication. Similarly, several individual change initiatives, spearheaded by selected managers and supervisors, are leading to higher involvement in program development activities and improved policies and practices.

Moreover, the newly designed implementation infrastructure has included key partners, giving them the opportunity to participate in the implementation of change initiatives. For example, Dr. Jill Berrick from the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare expressed that the experience of working closely with the SF-HSA FCS in implementing various initiatives have been positive for her. The implementation meetings allow her to obtain a better understanding of the current issues relating to social work and child welfare. This, in turn,, has enabled her to be better connected to the field of social work and better inform her class curriculum.

### **Challenges**

Although the SF-HSA FCS has achieved some successes, it has also been experiencing several challenges. First, shifting an organizational culture is a long-term venture. While progress of the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative has been noticeable, significant changes are not yet evident.

For one, as noted by Barrett Johnson, the SF-HSA FCS experiences an unusually low turnover of staff for a public agency. While this can be seen as a strength (i.e. promotes stability and continuity), the challenge is that there is a majority of staff who are used to prevailing behaviors of the agency.

There is also the long-term challenge of sustaining this process in the future. The WE Initiative is only a three-year partnership with NCWWI; it is scheduled to end in November 2017. With the grant ending in November 2017, the SF-HSA FCS agency will need to identify existing resources to develop a model for sustainability.

### **Costs**

As noted previously, the NCWWI WE Initiative is a one-time, three-year partnership grant

awarded to only three jurisdictional sites. NCWWI has provided a lot of resources and support to the implementation of the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative including the COHA, leadership academies and Site-Based Team meetings. However, NCWWI is not available to interested counties looking to secure similar support and services. In speaking with Dr. Nancy Claiborne from the State University of New York at Albany, who is also the lead of NCWWI, there does not appear to be a another grant funding opportunity in the future.

### **Recommendation**

Overall, the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative is a robust effort to shift the organizational culture, which requires a tremendous amount of funding, resources and support. As such, without a grant opportunity like the NCWWI WE Initiative, it would be cost prohibitive for the DFCS to implement similar efforts to create a learning organization and shift culture. However, the DFCS can leverage existing resources to implement several aspects of the SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative—including the COHA, theory of change, logic model and Site-Based Teams. To develop a strong learning organization, the DFCS must integrate *Just Culture* and CQI, while leveraging existing resources to implement applicable aspects from SF Jurisdictional Change Initiative.

### **Next Steps:**

Based on the recommendation above, the next steps for the DFCS can be divided into four phases:

1. **Phase 1 (Assessment):** In this phase, the DFCS would analyze the current state of the department by collaborating with the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) to develop a comprehensive organizational health assessment that includes quantitative and

qualitative data. Quantitative analysis will require administering an online survey for the entire DFCS. The online survey must measure factors relating to *Just Culture* in the context of child welfare. Qualitative analysis will be gathered from the results of the listening circles and visioning sessions. Using data from the health assessment, the DFCS will determine areas of strengths and challenges for the department and prioritize the list of challenges.

2. **Phase 2 (Planning):** In this phase, a workgroup, including key partners, would use the CQI process to develop a theory of change and logic model to guide the work of the organizational culture shift. These two components will provide a roadmap for the successful integration of *Just Culture* and CQI. The workgroup will also identify existing resources, efforts and partnerships to support this project.
3. **Phase 3 (Execution):** In this phase, the DFCS would leverage existing resources, such as Unit-Based Teams (UBTs), to mimic that of Site-Based Teams to address issues relating to morale and communication. UBTs will be extended to all interested staff across different bureaus to promote participation of staff.
4. **Phase 4 (Evaluation):** In this phase, the DFCS would re-administer the comprehensive organizational health assessment on an annual basis to compare progress with previous years. Using comparative analysis, the DFCS would be able to determine recurring challenges.

## **Conclusion**

To provide services that are responsive to the needs of clients, the DFCS must be able to implement change effectively. As conveyed throughout this paper, creating a learning organization—supported by a culture of fairness and consistency and driven by data—would

provide the DFCS with the capacity to implement change. While replicating the SF Jurisdictional Change initiative efforts is not a feasible option, due to cost-related reasons, the DFCS can still implement several aspects from the initiative. By combining components from the jurisdictional change initiative with existing efforts relating to *Just Culture* and CQI, the DFCS can augment efforts towards developing a learning organization. Although creating a learning organization is a long-term endeavor that requires time and patience, it will ultimately enable the DFCS to implement change effectively, in turn, resulting in improved outcomes for children and families in the long-term.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Executive Leadership Team at the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency for the opportunity to participate in this program. Additionally, I would like to thank Barrett Johnson and the SF-HSA executive team for their time, flexibility and responsiveness to ensure a positive experience while completing this paper.

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