

Outcome Based Management: **The Importance of Creating a Learning Culture**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Mateo County Human Services Agency has been using Outcome Based Management (OBM) for nearly a decade. Today, OBM is used effectively in many programs county-wide. Most, if not all, budget decisions are made on the basis of current outcomes or on the creation of outcomes by which a new program will be measured.

The focus of this project is on the use of OBM in child welfare case management. It is a complex case management arena and does not readily lend itself to programs like the task tracker program, Track-It, that is used in San Mateo's tele-center. In San Mateo's child welfare program, several programs are being used to measure outcomes, including Business Objects, CWS/CMS, and Safe Measures. There is also a quarterly report that uses data from Berkeley, which provides a "dashboard" for managers that shows AB636 measures and how well the county is performing against those measures.

Santa Clara County uses these same tools to measure various child welfare outcomes, such as the timeliness of monthly contacts and updated case-plans; however, these tools are under-utilized. During tough economic times such as these, when agencies need to accomplish more with fewer resources, it

makes sense to make efforts to fully utilize all available resources, especially resources that are designed to help agencies run more efficiently.

To more fully utilize existing tools, the department needs to take more proactive steps toward creating a learning culture within the agency. I propose that the agency create a "Learning Consortium" composed of supervisors (especially those who have graduated from the BASSC program) and lead social workers who will engage in monthly conversations with Evaluation and Planning. It makes sense to consult with line staff and supervisors when evaluating trends in data to uncover possible explanations, especially when the evaluation involves trouble-shooting specific areas of concern. Additionally, it is wise to inspire and enlist frontline staff in the discussion to make them feel that they are a part of the solution; through this, they become engaged and take ownership not only in the problems of the agency, but also in its goals, the solution, and the success of the agency.

There is little to no cost to the agency for this project. It would require 10 to 12 staff members to meet with Evaluation and Planning for approximately 1½ hours per month.

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Pedometer: (noun) an instrument that measures the distance covered by a walker by recording the number of steps taken.

The pedometer has become an increasingly common object, recognizable by most adults. It can be seen in the workplace where diligent co-workers try to increase their physical activity throughout the day. It can be seen being worn by walkers and runners on the running track, on coastal trails, and on urban sidewalks. Almost any adult in the United States who has visited their doctor, turned on the television, or read a newspaper in the last year is probably aware that obesity is an issue for many adults in our country. To address this “national health crisis”, we, the collective adult population, are encouraged to increase our physical activity and to eat a healthier diet.

The pedometer is an important part of this movement. It allows an individual to know more precisely how far they actually walk on any given day. It provides individuals with a baseline, which serves as a “reality check” in some cases. People actually buy pedometers to use themselves because they recognize the importance of this tool, and they value it. It is a powerful motivation to do something.

Similarly, social workers can use various tools to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. Many people have embraced the pedometer as a tool for motivating increased physical activity; if presented correctly, social workers also appreciate access to tools that allow them to know how they are doing at their jobs. Such measurement opportunities provide a sense of control over one’s caseload. It allows a worker to know how they are doing “compared” to others.

Safe Measures

Several such tools exist and are being used in San Mateo County. One such tool is Safe Measures, which has the capability of measuring many things. Of particular interest to the social worker (and the agency), is that it can track the timeliness of contacts and updated caseplans, as well as being able to track timely medical and dental appointments for foster youth.

It is one thing for the executive management team to have access to such a tool and to know how the agency is doing overall. This knowledge is helpful in guiding program decisions and in troubleshooting areas that are not doing so well. It can help identify a particular bureau or unit when it is struggling. However, to continue the use of the metaphor, how useful or effective would the pedometer be to an individual, if only the doctor could see the pedometer screen?

After close inspection of San Mateo’s quarterly AB636 measures and Santa Clara County’s AB636 measures, a few things become apparent. Measures such as 2B: Timely Response (immediate), 2B: Timely Response (10-day), and 2C: Timely social work visits with child, have few other variables affecting their outcome outside of the social worker’s action, and these outcomes seem to show positive trends when more attention is paid to them. These measures are almost completely within the control of the social worker and when the social worker is made aware of the importance of the measure, we see improvements in outcomes. Table 1 (from San Mateo County) and Figure 1 (from Santa Clara County) show the AB636 outcome measure for 2B: Timely Response (immediate). These charts show the rate at which a social worker is able to respond to an Immediate Response

TABLE 1
2B: Timely Response (Immediate Response Compliance), San Mateo County
State/OBM Standard: \geq 95%

<i>Of all referrals requiring an immediate response, what percentage were responded to within 2 hours?</i>								
	Oct 2007– Dec 2007	Jan 2008– Mar 2008	Apr 2008– Jun 2008	Jul 2008– Sep 2008	Oct 2008– Dec 2008	Jan 2009– Mar 2009	Apr 2009– Jun 2009	Jul 2009– Sep 2009
Met Standard?	98%	99%	99%	98%	100%	100%	98%	98%
n = Timely	126	134	132	94	103	96	106	122
n = Not Timely	3	2	2	2	0	0	2	3
Quarter over Quarter Change	-0.1%	0.8%	0.0%	-0.6%	2.1%	0.0%	-1.9%	-0.5%

referral within two hours. The national standard is 95%; both San Mateo and Santa Clara County consistently meet this standard, and both typically exceed it.

Why do Some Areas in Child Welfare Respond Well to OBM?

Effective Outcome Based Management in the area of child welfare requires several things. First, the data is critical. It needs to be entered correctly and in a timely manner. For that to happen, social workers need to be motivated to input data into the system accurately.

There also needs to be good communication with the local court system. Additionally, there needs to be “buy-in” from all levels that we will work together to achieve federal standards. Foster parents and service providers need to understand the importance of things like annual dental and medical exams, and things like getting paperwork completed and turned in to social workers. The social worker acts as the front line, educating the court, foster parents, and service providers about federal and state standards, as well as about the importance of achieving those standards. It is critical then, that social workers understand the standards and the importance of achieving them.

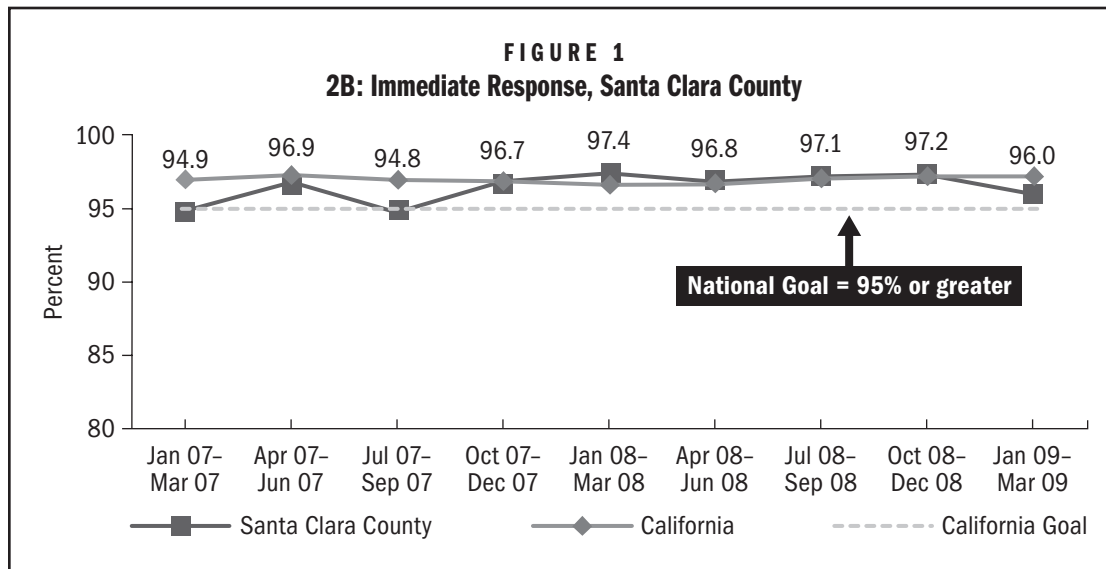
Change in Agency Culture

How does an agency foster the cultural change that is necessary to see positive momentum resulting from

OBM? In a study entitled “Outcomes-based Management and Organizational Learning: The Role of the Adult Educator in the Workplace”, Tracey Lloyd (2009) wrote:

“I feel like I am losing my soul.” This sentiment, expressed by a social service worker in a community-based employment centre, reflects growing concerns with greater accountability and the impact of bottom-line thinking on the nonprofit sector. Governments worldwide are focused on creating more efficient and economical public service systems. In a climate of shrinking resources and competition for funds, the outcomes-based funding model has been introduced to allow funding organizations to make judicious funding decisions and increase public confidence in the nonprofit sector.

Similar to the large-scale cultural shift that occurred in the mid 1990’s when social workers in Santa Clara County were expected to begin using the CWS/CMS computer system to write court reports and record contacts, OBM creates a radical shift in how social workers are accustomed to evaluating their work. In the 1990’s we saw social workers put up a lot of resistance to the new CWS/CMS computer program; some social workers even retired rather than attempt to learn the program. The agency addressed this resistance in a variety of ways, including implementing a training called “Change Training”



that was designed to simply address the challenge of change. The agency also addressed staff morale in a variety of ways, including free pizza for staff and ice cream socials. Additionally, practical “user guides” were developed (e.g., the “Yellow Brick Road” and “cheat sheets”).

As Tracey Lloyd points out in her study, a common social worker response to outcome-based evaluation and management is the sentiment that “we are losing our soul”. Social workers become fearful that “the numbers” will become more important than the actual social work. The resistance to evaluating work by measuring outcomes is as real as the resistance that existed 15 years ago when CWS/CMS was introduced. Further, social workers often report anecdotally that one of the reasons they went into the field of social work was because of their discomfort with math and statistics. It is not surprising then, that some social workers view a document made up of lots of graphs and pie charts with apprehension.

Hawthorne Effect

What we have seen in Santa Clara County can be likened to the “Hawthorne Effect,” a form of reactivity where subjects improve an aspect of their behavior simply in response to the fact that they are being studied. In 2008, when social workers were informed

that there was an audit of the measure “Timeliness of Medical and Dental Appointments,” the agency saw a dramatic improvement in the measure’s rates. Lists were maintained and social workers received emails with the names of children in foster care who had not received timely medical or dental appointments. With the assistance of the public health nurses, these numbers improved dramatically in a relatively short period of time.

Two years later, however, even though caseloads had dropped dramatically, there were no longer any lists being generated and sent to the social workers; interestingly, the timeliness rates had dropped off. It was as if the measure were no longer important, or that “if nobody is watching”, social workers would not continue to emphasize the importance of timely appointments to foster parents.

Is this because social workers don’t care? Or is it that they only care if they believe they might be “punished” if they don’t continue to maintain a particular standard? Or, perhaps, is it because there isn’t enough feedback to the social workers to ensure continued performance? Research in the area of self-determination shows that people can be moved to action by extrinsic motives (i.e., working toward an external goal); however, intrinsic motivation (i.e., initiating an activity for its own sake because it is in-

teresting and satisfying in itself, rather than achieving an external goal) can play a significant role once it has been internalized.

An example of this is the pedometer! People might initially wear a pedometer because their physician, or a co-worker, has challenged them to walk 10,000 steps per week. The initial extrinsic motive is a reward, such as making one's physician happy, entry into a drawing for a gift certificate for achieving the 10,000 steps goal, or good-natured competition between peers. Over time, however, it is hoped that a habit is formed, and that people will begin to enjoy the feeling of walking. Ultimately, the benefits of walking then become the rewards in and of themselves. The motivation becomes intrinsic.

In the field of child welfare where social workers have significant educational attainment and they have already made a considerable commitment to the profession, the workforce is primed for valuing the end goal of achieving outcome measures as an intrinsic motivator if the measures are demonstrated to relate directly to child and family well-being. Social workers need access to the tools (e.g. Safe Measures). Just as a person might know that walking is good and value good health, the individual may still need a pedometer to further motivate him or her to walk more.

Equally important, communication is essential between social workers and their supervisors, and between supervisors and their managers, about how staff is doing at achieving these standards. "The supervision of staff and the nurturing of a learning environment are all about improving relationships. The supervisor-supervisee relationship requires ongoing attention if effective communications and understanding are to be built and maintained" (Austin, 2004). Without this communication, the relationship is not nurtured and the importance of OBM can be lost.

Creating a Learning Organization

To create a learning organization, or to create an agency culture of learning, there needs to be on-going communication between all levels at an agency.

Additionally, the ability to have a "reflective practice" is critical. A social worker needs to be able to "see" performance results and analyze the factors that influence outcomes; this is what stimulates both individual and organizational learning.

Organizational members are learning and planning on the basis of performance data. Inquiry is integrated into the organization's culture and work processes, and is performed primarily by staff. Evaluation becomes an internal function. Learning in this context is informal and rooted in experience. The challenge for managers, however, is to make this learning readily apparent for frontline staff. (Lloyd, 2009)

San Mateo County's model provides a really good example of how to do this well. Operations Manager Eduardo Kirycyzun oversees the Health and Food Stamps Tele-Center. He gave a presentation about the effectiveness of the Track-It system used by his staff. He provided reports that demonstrated the dramatic improvements in work efficiency after the Track-It system was implemented. He is passionate, and conveys his enthusiasm, not just for the Track-It system, but also for his staff and their accomplishments. When he walks through the building where his staff works, he communicates his strong investment in the outcome of his program, his interest in his staff, and his pride in their accomplishments.

The manager's perspective signals the importance of having communication systems and strategies in place that reflect a commitment to qualitative measures. Frontline staff need to see their efforts validated in client impact stories that demonstrate the relationship between organizational mission and performance results.

In fact organizational learning, as a management paradigm, is not simply about traditional business metrics. Successful implementation in this particular context depends on an appreciation of the more qualitative and sometimes subtler aspects of organizational life that influence performance. (Lloyd, 2009)

The success of OBM is attainable: it requires the right tools, an agency culture that supports learning, and good communication between all levels!

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