

MOVING TOWARDS HUMAN SERVICES INTEGRATION: GAINS AND LESSONS LEARNED

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Organizational change is a fact of life. It is inevitable. And it is also difficult and stressful. In fact, many psychologists define stress as adaptation to change. Without change, however, there can be no improvement. In the business world, change places an essential role in the development of an organization. Indeed, change is prerequisite to excellence and no organization can maintain it without changing and renewing.

As part of its commitment to excellence and its mission to meet the complex needs of its clientele, County X boldly implemented a decision to integrate family and child services into one multi-discipline agency or Human Services Agency. The changes they sought were truly revolutionary. Dramatic improvements in social service delivery was the goal. Integration would combine Youth and Family Services, Job Training and Economic Development, Housing and Community Services and Income Maintenance into one Human Services Agency. This paper highlights the gains they achieved, the lessons they learned, and the obstacles they overcame. The Executive Director of the Human Services Agency, Division Directors, Program Managers, Supervisors and line staff were interviewed to give a broad view of the integration process and the effects of this sweeping change.

By integrating four divisions- Youth and Family Services, Job Training and Economic Development, Housing and Community Services, and Income Maintenance into one agency, County X sought to change service delivery in three ways. First, the integrated Human Services Agency would approach the comprehensive service needs of families-not individuals within families- with a collaborative, holistic, multi-departmental strategy. Social service personnel would service drug and alcohol problems, for example, in light of employment and housing issues. Second, County X would develop a centralized intake system whereby clientele could identify problems and needs at one entry point in the system. Clientele need fill out only one form. Third, the Human Services Agency would focus on homelessness prevention.

IMPEDIMENTS TO CHANGE

The simple logic and genius of the Human Services Agency's integrated approach to improving social service delivery carried with it an inherent characteristic of policies and organizational changes that seem perfect on paper. They are very, very difficult to implement.

A number of factors made implementation difficult. First, the decision to integrate did not initially involve solicitation of input from line staff merging into the Human Services Agency. Input was not sought at the time of the decision. It was not until the Executive Director of the Human Services Agency came on board that a vehicle for soliciting input was engaged via a strategic planning process. Second, integrating four different departments with four distinct cultures and service delivery approaches created resistance; staff found it difficult to view programming in a multi-disciplined world. Integration requires holistic thinking, and that can be very difficult for people who have been servicing clientele differently for many years. Third, decision makers did not anticipate the normal, predictable resistance and grieving that

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accompany change and in so doing they overlooked, at least initially, their critical role in guiding employees through the change process. They overlooked their leading role in softening the impact and blow of organizational change.

To soften the impact of change, Waterman (1987) challenges public and private organizations to confront and resist the American traditional management style in which supervisors make decisions and policies behind closed doors and employees follow orders. Organizations must view all people within the organization as potential sources of creativity, as valuable resources that can provide input on policy changes. This does not imply, however, democratic management where everyone has an equal voice. Nor is it autocratic management. Instead, top management points line employees in a general direction for change- a direction that is flexible, broad, open to modification- and recruits line employee creativity and expertise before the change becomes policy. Management empowers employees, encourages their contribution, validates their expertise. Waterman calls this management style "directed autonomy."

The assumption that justifies a "directed autonomy" management approach is the fact that line staff know best how to do their job, and therefore they are the best suited to improve it. When organizations employ the traditional management approach where bosses decide things and workers carry them out, resistance, resentment and powerlessness surface. With this approach, change is more difficult.

When County x implemented its decision to integrate social services, employees perceived it as a "decision made administratively," a "top-down decision," a "decision made upstairs." Some employees were told that transfers would occur. In some cases, employees were given one week before integrating into the new Human Services Agency. As a result, some people felt coerced, powerless, "like something happened to them." A general perception ensued that someone made them do something without consulting them.

Perhaps expediency necessitated this approach. What is clear is that little or no communication or consultation occurred with staff expected to implement integration. At the time of transfer into the new Human Services Agency, one worker did not know what her primary role would be. Another did not know who she worked for, what department she belonged to. Still another felt that he had been coerced to transfer with little or no training provided to prepare him for his new role. There seemed to be a shortage of clerical and support personnel. Very little time was given to the five agencies to get acquainted, to learn about each other's discipline. A team atmosphere was lacking.

There were other unintended effects. One employee felt that integrating into the new agency pulled her away from her support network she had developed in her old department. Another employee resented the integration, felt that he would have to "start all over again and prove himself as a brand new employee." Employees who had invested a great deal in their positions prior to integration felt invalidated, resisted the move. One employee even filed a formal grievance.

Some of this resistance derives simply from a natural fear that accompanies change in general. People like routine. It inspires a confidence, familiarity and comfort level that we all yearn for.

Once we establish this comfort level, however, we do not easily give it up. This is especially true when people face broad, encompassing change. Scott and Hoppe (1995) argue that employees will respond predictably to change with fear, anger, grief, and even rebellion, and that it is the role of supervisors and administrators to allay these feelings and guide people through change. Workers facing change need information. They need someone to hear their fears. And they need someone to direct their emotions and energies in positive directions. When supervisors ignore or fail to anticipate the emotional impact of changing people's work habits, problems multiply.

The new Executive Director of the Human Services Agency hired shortly after the four divisions had integrated immediately saw the need to mollify staff resentment and solicit input. To facilitate communication, a newsletter was created. To help staff acknowledge the change, the Executive Director created a new logo and letterhead for the newly integrated Human Services Agency. The Executive Director also assessed management to gauge their commitment to integration and its philosophy. The results of the assessment underscore the realities and impact of changing people's work habits. Ten managers either took early retirement, laterally transferred or resigned.

In addition to the predictable resistance and stress associated with change, the newly integrated Human Services Agency faced what might be termed "program tunnel vision." One administrator posed the challenge this way, "How do you show people the big picture, get them to look at the world, not merely the focus of their program and their job roles?" In other words, how do you get people to do things differently? How do you encourage people to move across divisions and service programs? How do you encourage someone in housing or drug and alcohol or mental health, for example, to see how that relates to child welfare and unemployment?

GAINS AND SUCCESSES

Those line staff who eventually overcame "program tunnel vision," however, learned a great deal about various social service programs. Indeed, a major development and gain that ensued from integration was a movement towards more well-rounded social service personnel. Some line staff slowly became conversant with housing, income, alcohol and drug, and employment services whereas before they interacted with these departments by referral only. Some line staff even developed less formal relationships with staff from other departments, operating on a first name basis and sharing information about each other's respective departments and services. A team atmosphere emerged. One administrator believes that a wellrounded mindset defines integration. "What makes a division like this run efficiently," he argues, "and what really integrates it, is when everyone knows what is going on and what the others are doing."

Much was learned from both management and line staff points of view. Administrators within the Human Services Agency learned, perhaps the hard way, that staff input and expertise is essential to the decision making process. Further, staff learned that they should and would seek any opportunity to make sure that they were heard.

When the Human Services Agency's Youth and Family Services Division decided to service clientele on a regional basis and develop Integrated Community Based Services (I.C.B.S.), for example, management's first step involved soliciting staff input and expertise. Staff responded

overwhelmingly to management's invitation to speak and participate. They felt validated and took part in the integration planning process. Consequently, the feeling that "something has been done to me," rarely surfaced.

CONCLUSION

It is essential that organizations change to meet new demands. It is equally essential that management recognize that changing people's work habits imposes a kind of loss accompanied by grief, denial, fear and anger. People will resist change. At the same time that management recognizes its role as "stress manager" in the organizational change process, supervisors must also resist traditional management notions that exclusively position managers in a decision making role and line staff in a "follow orders" mode. Line staff do know the job better than anyone. It is logical, then, to solicit their expertise and knowledge when implementing change.

Moving towards integrated human services is a monumental challenge, a process that requires a revolutionary spirit. It requires viewing the world and one's role within organizations through progressive lenses. Most importantly, though, it requires time. People need time to get to know one another, to develop rapport and work together. They need time to establish trust. Learning about one another's job roles and department parameters also requires patience. Integration will take time.

Waterman, Robert H., The Renewal Factor: How the Best Get and Keep the Competitive Edge, New York: Bantam Books, 1987.