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Linking Departmental Priorities to Knowledge Management: The Experiences of Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department

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Federal welfare reform, local service collaborations, and the evolution of statewide information systems inspired agency interest in evidence-informed practice and knowledge sharing systems. Four agency leaders, including the Director, Deputy Director, Director of Planning and Evaluation, and Staff Development Program Manager championed the development of a learning organization based on knowledge management throughout the agency. Internal department restructuring helped to strengthen the Planning and Evaluation, Staff Development, and Personnel units, which have become central to supporting knowledge sharing activities. The Four Pillars of Knowledge framework was designed to capture agency directions in relationship to future knowledge management goals. Featuring People, Practice, Technology and Budget, the framework links the agency's services, mission and goals to the process of becoming a learning organization. Built through an iterative process, the framework was created by observing existing activities in each department rather than being designed from the top down. Knowledge management can help the department to fulfill its mission despite reduced resources.

KEYWORDS Knowledge management, organizational priorities, learning organization

A learning organization has been defined by the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCCHSD) as an organization that systematically learns from its experience about what works and what does not work in order to

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increase effectiveness, performance, and innovation by creating an organizational culture that is non-threatening and empowering where the entire workforce continuously develops organizational competence. The essential components of a learning organization include: (a) data and information gathering, (b) problem solving, (c) innovation and experimentation, (d) learning from the past and tracking trends, (e) learning promising practices from others, and (f) open communication and the transfer of knowledge throughout the organization Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency (SCCHRA).

Senior staff members working to embed knowledge management practices into SCCHSD acknowledge the work as an ongoing process where the creation of knowledge sharing systems is being linked to current and future agency priorities. Several events have been pivotal in the department's journey to becoming a learning organization.

THE EVOLUTION OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (welfare reform) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004) had a dramatic impact on the practices and services of SCCHSD with respect to defining and measuring service outcomes and searching for promising practices relevant to local needs. The strong focus on performance outcomes stimulated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 gave birth to increased interest in evidence-informed practice and the development of knowledge sharing systems.

Prior to welfare reform implementation a two-year $100,000 grant was received in 1996 from the Foundation Consortium for the Comprehensive Integrated Services Reinvestment Project (CISRP). It called for demonstrating and assessing how prevention and early service interventions are cost efficient and beneficial to clients. The primary partners included the County's Children's Mental Health Division, the non-profit Family Resource Center Network, County Probation, and the Pajaro Unified School District. The project evaluated the service outcomes of three service delivery sites that worked toward ensuring the safety and stability of children. Its success attracted the attention of other local community partners as well as foundations (Packard Foundation and California Endowment).

Based on the CISRP experience, the Family Resources Center Network and the local United Way's Community Assessment Project developed a partnership called "What Works Project: Investing in Children and Families." It used an outcome-based model for health and human service delivery developed by Mark Friedman and greatly influenced SCCHSD's focus on performance outcomes and inspired staff to incorporate best practices, evaluation methods, and other knowledge sharing practices to inform its

service delivery system. In addition, the evolution of statewide information systems (e.g., Child Welfare CWS/CMS in the late 1990s and Welfare to Work CalWIN in the early 2000s) confirmed the necessity of understanding and incorporating information technology for collecting, organizing, and sharing information.

Along with all the systems changes, the director of SCCHSD has had a strong commitment to investing in leadership development at all levels of the department, frequently drawing upon its annual training contract with the Center for Human Services, University of California, Davis. In 2005, SCCHSD contracted for a two-year on-site training that focused on leadership skills for the senior management. The day-long monthly sessions included the following topics: executive leadership, sustained transformational change, high performance organizations, communication skills, and determining and setting direction. The goals of the training were to prepare senior managers to provide the leadership needed to promote a learning culture and evidence-informed practices. During these training sessions, senior managers began to explore different ways of linking strategic planning to the department's mission. As a result, a new and shorter mission statement was created to more accurately reflect the work that was being done. In addition SCCHSD created a motto statement, "We make a difference." The mission changes and creation of a motto reflected the future changes the department wanted to make on the path to becoming more of a learning organization.

REORGANIZATION

Internal department restructuring helped to strengthen the three administrative units of Planning and Evaluation, Staff Development, and Personnel. These units have become central to supporting knowledge sharing activities. Previously, the Planning and Evaluation unit had consisted of three senior analysts who reported directly to the deputy director. This unit carried out several administrative functions for human resources as they primarily oversaw community contracts, staffed the Homeless Services Continuum of Care and several other commissions, performed legislative analysis, and managed public information. Through a decentralized model, each program area has its own analyst who develops and manages more specific program information. Although the decentralized model strengthens the ability of each program to utilize its own data analysis functions, it can also contribute to the isolation of program departments and the fragmentation of data.

In the spring of 2006, the Planning and Evaluation Unit expanded to include a director of Planning and Evaluation, two senior analysts, one assistant analyst, and one typist clerk. The purpose of the expansion was to centralize information management across the department in order to

support integrated services and cross-division collaborations, improve performance outcomes, and promote evidence-informed practices. This expansion was a result of increased demands for data by finders, the commitment to creating a learning agency, and the availability of financial resources for more positions.

This expansion allowed for the Planning and Evaluation Unit to become strongly involved in the Child Welfare System Improvement Plan (SIP). The process that the Child Welfare staff went through to create their SIP serves as a model of change for the entire department. The development and implementation of the SIP was successful due to its in-depth and comprehensive assessment, the diversity of stakeholders, and the degree of transparency in sharing departmental data, including the identification of weaknesses. The SIP steering committee included foster parents, relative caregivers, attorneys (representing both parents and children), local CBO directors, directors from Children's Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol and Probation programs, the County Education Superintendent, and others. The nine-month assessment used telephone surveys to capture the perceptions of parents, guardians, youth, and foster parents and relatives who were caring for a child in the system. Online surveys were distributed to all community and public agencies that serve Child Welfare families or foster parents/relatives, and to all Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services staff. Mail surveys were sent to foster parents and relative caregivers and to Court Appointed Special Advocates staff and volunteers. Local key informant groups included former foster youth, court partners such as the Dependency Court Judge, Parents and Minors Counsel, the County Counsel, and others. Based on the data collected from this incredibly thorough assessment the SIP steering committee adopted a six-year plan (SCCHRA). The Planning and Evaluation Unit is now assisting with the implementation of this plan while also starting a similar process for assessing the outcomes of Welfare to Work programs. The successful completion of the Child Welfare assessment was based on the development of a transparent and trusting working environment at all levels of the agency, which allowed everyone to feel safe when identifying areas for improvement and learning from them.

Beyond specific programs and initiatives, the Planning and Evaluation Unit is developing a plan for addressing department-wide information management issues in order to better monitor performance and outcomes for the entire agency. Since data resides in different subsystems throughout the agency, the unit began by mapping the locations of data and different ways to extract it, especially from complex statewide systems like CalWIN. Once the data is extracted and standardized, the unit will be able to work with program departments to improve the monitoring of performance.

In addition to a larger and centralized Planning and Evaluation Unit, the Personnel and Staff Development divisions were reorganized under the supervision of the deputy director and no longer the responsibility of the

director of Administrative Services who has responsibility for Fiscal, IT, Facilities, and Fraud Investigation staff. Under the supervision of the deputy director, Staff Development and Personnel serve a central role in implementing a learning organizational model and supporting knowledge sharing.

Staff Development serves the entire department like Information Technology and Personnel, and its broader focus gives it the flexibility to support knowledge sharing and organizational culture change initiatives: (a) the Staff Development program manager works closely with the department directors to identify needs that surface with restructuring and new initiatives, (b) helps examine the knowledge possessed by staff in terms of supporting changes, (c) standardizes and institutionalizes successful projects, trainings, or initiatives in the department, and (d) finds ways for staff to share knowledge. Staff Development is currently working on capturing and storing knowledge of staff through the clarification of job expectations along with training plans for each position classification. For example, since the program managers job description includes topics like familiarizing yourself with community groups, reviewing division budget, developing a contract, and writing a board letter, it is helpful to document how these tasks are carried out and the resources being used. This information can inform induction trainings and can be captured from employees that might be leaving the department. Due to recent budget constraints requiring the downsizing of their workforce, Staff Development is creating standardized approaches to orienting and for transitioning staff in order to ensure that staff skills and knowledge are transferred to new positions.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FOUR PILLAR FRAMEWORK

As SCCHSD incorporated new strategies, focused on performance outcomes, and re-organized the structure of the department, it became clear that these changes were interconnected and needed to reflect the common goal of a learning organization. Based on the 2007 Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) summit on Knowledge Management that helped to identify the need for common language, key terms, and a shared framework for the future, the Four Pillars of Knowledge framework was designed to capture the future agency directions in relationship to future knowledge management goals as noted in Figure 1. Featuring People, Practice, Technology, and Budget, the framework links the agency's services, mission, and goals to the process of becoming a learning organization. Each of the four elements are defined as:

- People: The agency provides opportunities for professional growth and development to a skilled and committed workforce in a collaborative work environment.

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FIGURE 1 Pillars of Knowledge.

- Practice: The agency promotes the awareness of external best practice research. Staff use culturally relevant and evidence-informed practices and services are integrated to best serve clients.
- Technology: The agency seeks technology solutions that support staff efficiency and effectiveness. Technology is used to track client outcomes and track agency performance on standardized measures. Feedback from various technologies is used to inform practice.
- Budget: The agency utilizes standardized tools to monitor budgets closely. Fiscal developments across programs are also monitored. The agency

stays informed on current budget knowledge, funding opportunities, and leveraging strategies.

Built through an iterative process in the spirit of knowledge management, the framework was created by observing existing activities in each department rather than being designed from the top down. The framework is designed to connect separate and fragmented efforts by integrating and sharing knowledge throughout the agency. According to the deputy director, in order for knowledge sharing to be successful there needs to be a commitment and a curiosity about the way we do business, as well as a way to communicate it in the form of a framework. The Four Pillars framework helps to foster commitment by illustrating the connections between knowledge sharing, service delivery, and client outcomes, when these connections are displayed in a one-page concept map.

In order for knowledge sharing to become a movement it needs a framework that helps staff see why it is important, how the agency seeks to meet its goals, what their role is, and how their role is connected to client outcomes. If knowledge sharing is interpreted as just another initiative or fad it will not be seen as a pivotal part of what staff does in the department. When new opportunities or challenges arrive the Four Pillars framework helps illustrates how change will be integrated into the service delivery system and how knowledge sharing can further the agency's goal of becoming a learning organization.

Based on the BASSC Knowledge Management Summit it was decided that the extended executive team would become the Knowledge Management Leadership Team (KMLT). The team includes: the Human Services director, Human Services deputy director, Administrative Services division director, Adult and Long Term Case Services division director, Family and Children's Services division director and assistant director, CareerWorks division director and assistant director, Benefit Services division director and assistant director, WIB director, director of Planning and Evaluation, chief fiscal officer, Information Technology manager, HRA personnel officer, and Staff Development program manager. Its monthly meetings are designed "to support the department's strategic decision making across four core knowledge areas (people, practice, technology, and budget) and prioritize the agency's knowledge needs in order to devise cost-effective, successful solutions that address these needs" (SCCHRA). The projected outcomes of the KMLT include:

Increase communication and clarify roles and responsibilities across the four knowledge areas.

1. Identify strategic priorities within the four knowledge areas on an annual basis.
2. Standardize the decision-making in all four knowledge areas.

3. Identify cross over opportunities and challenges across the four knowledge areas.
4. Monitor implementation plans (SCCHRA).

Four committees support each of the knowledge pillars. The Information Management Planning Council supports the technology pillar and works to "improve understanding of IT opportunities and resource limitations, and make recommendations on prioritizing the agency's data and information needs and deploying resources most efficiently" (SCCHRA). This committee consists of KMLT members and two supervisory staff from Information Technology. The committee is facilitated by the director of Planning and Evaluation and is staffed by a senior analyst from Planning and Evaluation. The Staff Development Strategic Planning Committee supports the "people" pillar and identifies issues and potential solutions in the area of human resources-recruiting, hiring, training, and providing professional development opportunities. This committee also consists of all KMLT members. Both the Staff Development Strategic Planning Committee and the Information Management Planning Council were already in place before the creation of the Four Pillars Framework.

While the committees are comprised, for the most part, of the same staff members, separate meetings are needed to focus the agenda on addressing each of the four pillars. Before the KMLT retreat in the fall, each committee reviews the values, data, and demands in each knowledge area in order to establish and prioritize recommendations for the annual agency strategic plan. The committees allow the KMLT to see the full landscape of all departmental needs for the upcoming fiscal year. With this wide lens, the KMLT is able to address competing needs, identify opportunities for collaboration, and understand how all the recommendations fit together as a whole. For the fall retreat, the budget recommendations come from the fiscal department, while practice priorities come from the Planning and Evaluation Unit and the Cultural Competence Committee (which consists of all staff members from all levels of the department). It remains to be seen if formal committees will be needed for the budget and practice pillars.

THE FOUR FOUNDING MOTHERS

In order for knowledge management to permeate an agency, it needs to be supported by key agency leaders and four women in SCCHSD have spearheaded the learning organization campaign. Cecilia Espinola, Human Services Director, (an MSW graduate of UC Berkeley), prefers the term learning agency to knowledge management, as it relates to evidenced-informed practice. As the department director, Cecilia has made knowledge management efforts a top priority by encouraging conversations about learning at all levels

of the organization and finding the resources to enhance knowledge sharing. Deputy Director Ellen Timberlake used knowledge management concepts to create the first draft of the Four Pillars framework in her role as facilitator of senior management collaboration. Using knowledge management concepts she seeks to ensure that all structures are in place to support effective agency operations and directly supervises the Staff Development and Planning and Evaluation Units that play a central role in promoting knowledge sharing throughout the department.

As the director of Planning and Evaluation, Madeline Noya's biggest role is to understand data, interpret it, and communicate it in ways so that staff can improve practice. Madeline is often charged with identifying the specific tasks necessary to create a learning organization. While Ellen and Cecilia have a directive role in knowledge management, and Madeline carries a data-based operationalizing role, Evelyn Hengeveld–Bidmon, Staff Development Program Manager, plays a key role in implementing knowledge sharing practices. Evelyn works with staff so that they can contribute to knowledge sharing efforts, and participate actively in changing the organizational culture to become a learning agency. Furthermore, Evelyn and the Staff Development Unit work to institutionalize practices that the agency wants to perpetuate. The department director explained that all four women have a similar responsibility in terms of supporting the idea represented in the four pillars framework, which is to live it, breathe it, and model what it means.

LESSONS LEARNED

The success of knowledge sharing is not just dependent on staff leadership but also on the general fiscal climate that calls for reduced staffing and resources. However, knowledge management practices can help the department to continue fulfilling its mission, even with reduced resources. As county social service agencies face decreasing budgets, increases in accountability, retirement of key staff members, and increasing workloads, the urgency for implementing knowledge sharing systems increases. In order to continue the development of knowledge management, regardless of the fiscal or political climates, several lessons have been learned.

Structure

1. It is possible and necessary to embark on the development of knowledge sharing systems in small counties in times of budgetary constraints.
2. A conceptual model like the Four Pillars framework can help explain the principles behind their efforts to enhance their service delivery and improve client outcomes.

3. Always assess how knowledge management will best fit into your unique working environment.
4. In addition to committing to knowledge management conceptually, commitment must also occur on a resource level, and departments must realistically assess what they can do with available resources.
5. It is important to have an ideal but also work hard toward the next best thing when this ideal is unattainable given current circumstances.
6. A common language must be established by the department in order to successfully communicate the successes and challenges of implementing knowledge sharing systems.
7. Counties need to hire people who are knowledgeable in program evaluation and have experience in monitoring and supervising these functions.
8. Every knowledge management model needs to be flexible to accommodate rapid and constant change.

Process

1. Have patience to let the developmental process of knowledge management gradually unfold and do not expect it to become an edict in the department.
2. The competing demands, budgetary constraints, and initiatives overload experienced by many public social service agencies emphasize the importance of marketing knowledge management not as a new initiative, but as a reframing of information sharing and evidence-informed decision making.
3. An agency must integrate knowledge management into their culture and not have it operate as a separate entity.
4. Knowledge management needs champions within the agency; it must have supporters who believe in the positive changes it will bring.
5. Knowledge management is a developmental process. An agency often has to retrospectively see what has been accomplished and the future needs that remain to be addressed.
6. Counties have to balance knowledge sharing with a commitment to service standards, accountability, and evidenced-based practice regardless of where it is being implemented.

REFERENCE

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2004). Personal responsibility and work opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/abbrev/prwora96.htm

APPENDIX A: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Interviews

Cecilia Espinola, Human Services Director, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, CA

Ellen Timberlake, Deputy Director, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, CA

Madeline Noya, Director of Planning and Evaluation, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, CA

Evelyn Hengeveld–Bidmon, Staff Development Program Manager, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, CA