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The Use of Key Indicators as a Foundation for Knowledge Management: The Experiences of Monterey County's Social and Employment Services Department

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While effective knowledge management practices are commonly sought by organizations, facilitating the use and ongoing engagement in these practices can be challenging. To this end, one agency developed a strategy for institutionalizing their knowledge management functions by appointing a team responsible for monitoring and implementing knowledge management functions, and creating a report for use as a tool by departments agency-wide. Aimed at increasing transparency both within the agency and with the surrounding community, the report provides an overview of individual departments' programs, goals, recent caseload trends, and latest achievements. The report is made available online and accessible by the general public. This case study describes the development of this team and report, as well as lessons learned and future knowledge management goals for the agency.

KEYWORDS *Knowledge management, key indicators, knowledge sharing*

KEY INDICATORS: A FOUNDATION FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge management is an umbrella term, which describes several activities that promote learning, collaboration, and problem solving in an organization. The strategies used to support knowledge management practices

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depend on the county's political and fiscal environment, the interests and managing styles of department leaders, and the general working environment and culture of the department. The Monterey County Department of Social and Employment Services created a Key Indicators Report and Key Indicators Team to monitor and carry out several knowledge management functions. In this case study the author describes these functions as well as future knowledge management goals, the obstacles to meeting these goals, and the lessons learned to date.

THE KEY INDICATORS REPORT

The first Key Indicators Report was created for the Monterey County Department of Social and Employment Services in 2001. Today, the 70-page report consists primarily of data required by the state related to each program division. The most current key indicators report (2007) is available online and provides the community with a description of the County's Social and Employment Services programs, the demographics of the beneficiaries, and performance data (See Appendix A). The report is divided into sections for each social service branch (Community Benefits, CalWORKs Employment Services, Office for Employment Training, Aging and Adult Services, Family and Children's Services, and Military and Veteran's Affairs). Each section begins with an overview of each division, describing its goals and objectives, its service units, new goals or initiatives, and latest achievements. Each branches' programs are then described and information regarding eligibility requirements, client demographics (gender, child/adult, language, and ethnicity), and caseload trends is provided. In addition, some programs have data regarding timeliness and accuracy of application processing. Each program also has data reflecting the percent of customers receiving services by zip code.

In addition to program data, the Key Indicators Report also provides information regarding the six Monterey County community agencies that advise program policy, inform the board of supervisors, and assess community needs. The six community agencies are the Area Agency on Aging (AAA), the Community Action Partnership (CAP), the Workforce Investment Board (WIB), the Child Care Planning Council (CCPC), the Child Abuse Prevention Council (CAPC), and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Finally, the report includes data from Central Support Services, which includes Human Resources and Finance & Administrative Services. This section provides information regarding planned expenditures, anticipated revenue, planned program expenditures, and the number and ethnicity of employees by job group. The Key Indicators Report was originally intended to be published quarterly, but as the report expanded it became an annual report.

THE HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE KEY INDICATORS REPORT

The Key Indicators Report is compiled by the Key Indicators Team, which includes the Social Services director, the communications manager, management, and data analysts. Each program area is represented and each member is responsible for contributing their program data and assuring its accuracy. Assisted by the communications manager, data analysts synthesize and organize the data into one report that reflects the agency as a whole. The creation of the Key Indicators Report was initiated by the department director who had worked with a similar report as the chief financial officer for Alameda County Social Services. In 2001, the deputy director for Alameda County Social Services, who had overseen development of their director's quarterly report, was brought in to share lessons learned. This person worked with the team and external stakeholders for nearly a year to help determine the initial direction and content of the report based on the informational needs of department staff and external stakeholders.

The Key Indicators Report was created for the following reasons: (a) to uphold the principle of an open and transparent government that shares its service data in the spirit of "data democracy," (b) to integrate data from various programs into one document that staff and the community can easily access, (c) to promote awareness of services provided by the department and provide a resource to address service delivery questions raised by state and federal elected officials, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, and other community stakeholders, (d) to provide data needed in grant proposals and/or local newspaper articles, and (e) to provide a framework for staff to improve service outcomes, increase accountability, encourage the early identifications of problems and their resolutions, and increase staff motivation to sustain high levels of timeliness and accuracy in their work. While the report is available to the general public, the density and complexity of the data make it difficult to use this sophisticated information tool. The Key Indicators Team is searching for ways to make the report more user-friendly for the general population. The primary use of the report has been by the director and senior staff when responding to public officials, the media, and other community stakeholders.

THE INTERNAL USE OF THE KEY INDICATORS REPORT

The report serves as a knowledge repository for the department as it captures, stores, updates, and disseminates key information. As an internal tool, the director often uses the report to compare Monterey County outcomes with similar counties, as well as state averages, in order to identify areas of

success and areas for improvement. This information is then shared at all staff meetings. The report is also used to address demographic concerns (e.g., the fact that approximately 70% of service recipients do not speak English as a first language, directly influences the design of services and the nature of staff development).

The Key Indicators Report can also serve as an important tool for changing the agency's culture. Data and information can be very powerful when trying to change staff perceptions or reframe conversations that have existed for decades. For example, when direct service staff members believe that their workloads have increased to a level that negatively affects their service outcomes, they begin to search for other explanations when the caseload trend information in the Key Indicators Report indicates that case loads are lower than they have been in the past (e.g., increased complexity of the work or the changing needs of clients). By exploring these perceptions, the county is able to address the original concern and seek out the necessary resources based on more cooperative and collaborative conversations.

Although the report has served several internal functions, staff members who are not part of the key indicators group, are aware of the report, but are not utilizing its findings in conducting research, writing grants, and working with staff, media, public officials, or other constituents. Many staff members feel that the report contains too much information, and requested that the report focus more on core data elements. Since the comprehensive report contains detailed information for the whole department, it is designed to serve a multitude of stakeholders who have different information needs. In addition, as the agency expands the number of service programs, the report naturally reflects more data. Similarly, when constructive feedback on the report is received it is usually incorporated, which means that more data is added to an already lengthy report. In summary, it is difficult to determine the breadth and depth of information that needs to be included. While the report provides a broad overview of the agency, staff often needs more specific data applicable to their programs, which they can get from their own analysts on a more frequent basis than what is reported in the annual Key Indicators Report.

To increase the internal use of the Key Indicators Report, it has become clear that the report needs to be streamlined down to only critical data elements. One suggestion to keep the report short and concise involved highlighting branches for different publications. Another is to create a two to three page snapshot of each branch on trends and other key information so that the Key Indicators Report would look more like a report card and would only provide data that people are not aware of. For example, every report publishes data on the number of services provided by zip code and because this information stays consistent it would not be included unless there was a significant change. Another possibility is to provide general information in the Key Indicators Report and create an additional online system that

would enable staff to access information and data and to customize their reports whenever needed. Although this is technologically possible, a lack of resources makes this option less feasible.

While the suggestions for improvement relate primarily to the quantity of the data, the display of the data is another factor affecting internal use. The numbers in the report are not always put in context and therefore the meaning of the data is not always clear. There is a need to organize the data into readable formats such as graphical representations of key data elements across divisions in the form of caseloads and client demographics as a way of informing staff about the connection of different program data and its relation to a larger societal context. By illustrating the data in a more accessible way that is easier to understand, the data can become more relevant and applicable to those most likely to use evidence informed practices.

A formal system for disseminating the information in the report is also needed in order to reach line staff and their supervisors. In order for knowledge management practices to permeate the entire agency, the program managers need to find ways to disseminate the information and apply it to the unique working environments of their specific programs. The report needs to be marketed differently to line staff in order to increase interest and participation. In summary, while the report has been successful in gathering and organizing key data as an important foundation for a knowledge management system, the information in the report needs to be transformed into information that staff can use to inform their practice.

THE KEY INDICATORS AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

In order to explicitly support a learning organization by utilizing knowledge management practices, the Key Indicators Team is expanding its goals, functions, and responsibilities. In addition to compiling the data in the report, more attention needs to be given to analyzing the data and sharing the information internally to inform practice, problem solving, and other knowledge management functions. The Key Indicators Team can be an effective vehicle to initiate change and to implement more knowledge management practices based on similar goals and concerns, as well as a history, since 2001, of collaborative teamwork.

The Key Indicators Team currently creates a place for cross-departmental knowledge sharing, even though their programs continue to operate with each branch having unique objectives that require specialized expertise. This working environment often prevents cross-division collaboration. The Key Indicators Team is a cross-departmental group that brings people together who usually do not work together on a daily basis. The team encourages programs to look beyond their own specialties, see their interconnectedness,

and the common goals they all work to achieve. This team provides a space for staff to share problem-solving strategies and to broadly learn from other programs. Information sharing across departments has the potential to inspire integrated services and to improve the working atmosphere of the department. Furthermore, creativity can flourish when people work in diverse groups. The challenge is to find ways to duplicate this experience of the Key Indicators Team throughout the organization.

There is growing interest in finding ways to share homegrown promising practices as well as external research throughout the department. While members on the Key Indicators Team currently do this kind of sharing within their own branches, they recognize that they also need to share this information across branches and assess its value and applicability for others. For example, the CalWORKs Employment Services branch has had to create new strategies to meet the federal workforce participation requirements. By using the data in the Key Indicators Report, this branch has created new strategies and is now evaluating the outcomes to determine if they have been successful. This process is similar to what the Family and Children's Services branch did when creating their System Improvement Plans under the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636). The Key Indicators Team has provided a forum for the Family and Children's branch to share strategies and lessons learned from their process of gathering information and evaluating best practices. Similarly, CalWORKs Employment Services can add to the knowledge of promising practices once they have completed their evaluation. In addition to promoting promising practices, the data in the Key Indicators Report can be used to develop legislative initiatives and a strategic plan for the entire department.

The team also serves a knowledge capturing function. The director refers to the team as part of his succession plan. As the executive branch and senior managers retire, the Key Indicators Team is building a strong middle management group that is fostering strong relationships and knowledge interactions, which are necessary for successful leadership succession. This team is discussing how it will capture the tacit and explicit knowledge of experienced employees who are leaving the department as well as capturing knowledge from employees they currently manage in their own branches. By capturing and disseminating knowledge from all levels of the department, the team also helps support upward communication. Because of its central position and its knowledge generating, capturing, and disseminating roles the team can perform planning, evaluation, and advising functions. When initiatives are started, or when program branches find themselves in need of new information, the Key Indicators Team can help facilitate discussions, help staff access data easier and faster, bring in external information, and provide a central place for programs to share diverse ideas.

Although the team plans to bring in external information and help plan and evaluate services, it will be unable to take on the job as a formal planning

and evaluation unit. Similarly, in order to avoid a top-down approach, the team takes on a more facilitative role to respond to demands in the agency. Eventually Monterey County would like to create a separate planning, evaluation, and research team that can devote the necessary time and energy to these activities. The county would also like to create more action-oriented partnerships with universities. Although the county currently partners with the Center for Social Services Research, without a unit devoted to research it has been difficult to utilize this resource.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

There are several challenges to getting buy-in from staff inside and outside the Key Indicators Team regarding new activities to promote a learning organization. First, because of heavy workloads, staffing levels, and time pressures most staff members feel they are not able to accomplish the daily activities that must be completed. The time and effort required to step back, look at the agency as a whole, and determine how one can contribute to the fostering of a learning organization often seems impossible. Therefore, supporting a learning organization is viewed as an additional activity instead of a re-conceptualization of how staff currently works, and staff members often do not feel they have the time or energy to be involved. Second, the nature of public service agencies does not easily lend itself to the kind of re-conceptualizing and restructuring necessary to support knowledge management activities. Working in a public service agency, staff members are subject to many regulatory and compliance standards and increasing rules for accountability. Staff members are primarily concerned with meeting external requirements of the state and the federal government and often do not feel they have the flexibility to participate in knowledge management activities. Tolerance levels for frustration are usually high in public service agencies, but increasing requirements and expectations can negatively impact staff morale and reduce motivation to engage in new activities.

Third, the quality of the department's data management systems hinders the internal use of this data. For example, the system currently used for the CalWORKs Employment Services Branch was created before Welfare to Work and does not lend itself to extracting data. Creating a data table can take months and analysts often resort to manually counting. Using current IT systems, many branches find it difficult to create ad-hoc reports. Furthermore, because of a lack of IT resources, divisions are unable to collect data on what happens after services are provided, which is incredibly valuable data for determining a program's success. For example, the state Employment Development Department's (EDD) database contains the information needed to track employment outcomes six months or a year after receiving financial

assistance, but the CalWORKs database is not linked to EDD, making it nearly impossible to extract this data.

Finally, technology and the nature of communication are changing rapidly, which directly impacts work expectations. Today people want and expect to see change immediately. This expectation for fast results often discourages staff involved in changing the work environment of an entire department. This type of change is a slow process, whose achievements are not always easily identified, as outcomes such as increased communication and creativity are difficult to quantify. However, time and patience are essential ingredients when facilitating the development of a learning organization.

The communications manager who is coordinating the realignment of the Key Indicators Report consulted individually with each team member by asking about the history of the report, how work was being done, the team's achievements, issues that needed to be resolved, and each member's general understanding of how the report and team were being utilized. In order to facilitate change, he believes that they must tackle one issue at a time as there are many simultaneous and ongoing tasks required to create this kind of change (moving cautiously toward their goals to ensure staff that they won't be pushed too far, too quickly). Equally important is being mindful of what the organization is already doing and may have been doing for decades that already supports a learning organization environment. Staff members need to be acknowledged for what they have already contributed before learning how to expand knowledge management activities.

The Key Indicators Team has begun to identify the resources and tools needed by all staff members in order for them to contribute in a way that is both beneficial for them and the agency. The communications manager believes that by starting with senior and executive management, the team is able to practice and find the best way to articulate the concept of the learning organization so that by the time staff are engaged the presentation of the goals, objectives and methods of a learning organization are clear. In order to successfully implement these changes there needs to be designated leadership to carry out the transformation to a learning organization. Sufficient time is needed to orient team members to their new roles and functions.

LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons for creating a key indicators report can be identified. First, the key steps to creating a key indicators report need to include a planning and implementation group in order to identify the purpose of the report, how it is intended to be used, and the outcomes of this utilization. It is then necessary to determine the most useful performance indicator data elements. The report should provide the agency and community with information not

already known or expected. The data must be organized in a way that is easy to read and clearly illustrates its relevancy based on standardizing the text and format of the report in order to save time and facilitate the data analysis process. It may also be necessary to hire a computer programmer to transfer the data from Excel to Publisher. It is also necessary to assess the department's assets and resources related to achievable goals because existing resources need to be maximized before additional resources are identified. The report's long term goals should be linked to the goals and objectives the department wants to achieve in terms of creating a learning organization. The goals must then be prioritized (e.g., who will analyze the data, to whom is the information to be communicated and how will need to be identified). Finally, it is important to involve the community when creating a key indicators report. However, agencies must keep in mind that it is not possible to include all the data demanded. The involvement of stakeholders can lead to more data required. Finally, a target audience and the purpose of the report needs to be linked to how the data can be organized in order to meet expectations across the board.

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Source. Monterey County Department of Social and Employment Services (2007).

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Interviews

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