From Start to Finish:

Child Welfare Implementation Teams that Go the Distance

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Implementing change in child welfare agencies and systems is exciting and challenging work. Implementation teams were a central strategy used by the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC) to support efforts to implement change and achieve goals. This brief presents strategies for building, managing, operating, and supporting effective implementation teams. It is intended for those who establish, authorize, and/or lead teams, as well as those who serve as team members. It is particularly designed for child welfare agency staff who are implementation or project directors, and their supervisors and managers. Insights, advice, and lessons learned through trial, error, and success are shared, as well as research on the importance of teams for achieving and sustaining change.

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BUILDING STRONGER CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Over the course of five years, the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC) provided training and technical consultation to support the following systems change initiatives to benefit children and families:

- Springboard Georgia – Using implementation science to implement a comprehensive child safety practice model
- Maryland Youth Matter – Enhancing youth decision-making and involvement in their services and permanency planning
- Mississippi Readiness for Family Centered Practice – Building organizational capacity to plan, implement, and sustain FCP
- North Carolina Reaching for Excellence and Accountability in Practice (REAP) – Strengthening community, county, and state collaboration to improve child outcomes
- In Home Tennessee – Developing effective in-home services and engaging children, families, and communities in service planning and delivery
- West Virginia Safety Assessment and Management System (SAMS) – Implementing a statewide child protective services model

One of five Implementation Centers, ACCWIC was funded from 2008 through 2014 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Part of the Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance Network, ACCWIC assisted public child welfare agencies in Federal Regions III and IV in implementing systems changes. Customized to each agency's particular strengths and needs, ACCWIC's approach was guided by the National Implementation Research Network's framework, systems of care values, CFSR (Child and Family Services Review), and research principles.

A basic internet search of phrases like "workplace teams," "effective teams," and "team building" will yield a wealth of information on the value, use, formation, and operation of teams in the workplace, the qualities of effective team members, and principles of teamwork. This information draws from numerous industries and across multiple fields, including business, organizational development, and performance management. Although ACCWIC consulted the research literature and other materials when developing this brief (see sidebar, *Highlights from the Literature*), we found that, by and large, the information did not speak to implementation teams in general -- a particular kind of team defined below -- or their role in child welfare specifically.

An *implementation team* is a cohesive group of individuals that develops, supports, and oversees high-fidelity implementation of a practice model, evidence-based practice, or other systemic change initiative with benefits for the initiative's target consumers or clients. Implementation teams differ from other teams described in the literature in critical ways:

- They are used to carry out a particular initiative over a limited period of time.
- Team members retain their regular job positions and responsibilities while serving on the team.
- They "sunset," or come to a planned close, at some point as their functions and capacities are absorbed into regular organizational business.

Implementation of change initiatives in child welfare is complex. ACCWIC learned that, for a new initiative to be successful and sustainable, early strategic planning was needed. As part of this planning at the executive level of the child welfare agency -- usually involving the agency's director and senior leaders -- an implementation team was formed to:

- Develop, support, and oversee the initiative's implementation plan, which typically took the form of a detailed, multi-faceted, and comprehensive work plan.

- Champion the change effort and secure resources.
- Address implementation barriers and opportunities.
- Use data to monitor progress and make informed decisions to ensure the change initiative's success.

In ACCWIC's experience, implementation teams offered many benefits. As noted by the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) and other colleagues, each team helped build the agency's internal capacity to manage change – no small feat in the ever-changing child welfare climate – by guiding the implementation process strategically and planning to sustain new practices, policies, and programs (NIRN 2012, Permanency Innovations Initiative 2013). Additionally, the teams promoted and demonstrated principles around collaboration, coordination, and joint decision-making. One implementation team member stated, "This effort has forced people in different units and sections to work together. I think we all learned that through joint planning teams, the integration of the work is absolutely critical."

By bringing together people with different but synergistic talents, perspectives, and relationships, the implementation team was positioned to oversee the tasks and activities of implementation. ACCWIC learned several critical lessons for bringing the right people to the table to form a well-functioning implementation team.

Highlights from the Literature

The research literature offers multiple definitions of a team, many of which reflect similar concepts. A classic definition of a team is "A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 112). The benefits of teams in general are also enumerated in the literature:

- Improved employee morale through greater participation in decision-making, increased commitment to the organization, and an enhanced sense of contribution to a shared vision for improvement (Kricher, 1997).
- Making professional connections, fostering joint problem solving, and increasing capacity to cope in challenging organizational environments (Fritzler, Clarke, Matsger & Brittain, 2012).

The literature likewise broadly reflects consensus on what makes teams effective, pointing to factors such as:

- High task interdependence or high degree of coordination and collaboration among team members who have a variety of skills to complete a product or service (Shea & Guzzo, 1987).
- Shared understanding of the organizational mission, vision, and values that enables the team to develop and implement strategies that guides collective action and makes the vision meaningful (Hodges, Israel, Ferreira, & Mazza, 2007).
- Demonstration of particular skills and abilities, including conflict resolution, collaborative problem solving, communication, goal setting, performance management, planning, and task coordination (Gibson & Kirkman, 1998).

The decision to form an implementation team required understanding what the team was and was not, and whether one was actually needed. Before a team was convened, ACCWIC guided executive staff to determine the nature of implementation tasks and whether a team was needed to accomplish them.

In ACCWIC's experience, establishing an implementation team required a planful and systematic process involving two key stages: 1) identifying team members, and 2) facilitating the team's initial formation.

Identifying Team Members

A diverse team membership helped ensure that the implementation team invited and considered different ideas and strategies, examined their implications, and anticipated their impact from multiple perspectives. ACCWIC found that the stronger implementation teams included representatives from various organizational functions, such as training, policy, quality improvement, communications, field operations, and program management and of organizational levels, from county and region to statewide. ACCWIC further found that teams were more viable if they included individuals with diverse skills and

The Role of Leadership in "Making or Breaking" Implementation Teams

Creating a work environment in which teams can thrive is often more difficult than expected. Helping teams be cohesive and clear about their mission and accomplish the work is easier said than done, particularly in organizations with a tradition of working in siloes or exercising top-down leadership. Stated ACCWIC's Project Director, "You can't just take people from silos to the conference room and call it a team." This is where agency leadership is essential to team formation and functioning. In ACCWIC's experience, some agencies' organizational cultures were not hospitable to supporting an implementation team. In general, those organizational cultures were oriented to compliance and directive authority – staff were accustomed to being told what to do and not often invited and encouraged to voice opinions and make decisions. Other organizational cultures that were less conducive to implementation teams tended to use one-way communication with staff, either rarely coming together to interact and problem solve or using meeting time to simply update or "report out" to each other rather than engage in meaningful dialogue and joint decision making. To create a more conducive organizational culture to successful implementation teams, ACCWIC identified four critical ways agency leaders can support their implementation team:

- Anticipate that new ways of working will create discomfort and resistance.
- Ensure timely access to and focused attention by agency leaders.
- Address and overcome barriers quickly.
- Ensure adequate, appropriate resources are in place.

The fourth point – resourcing – warrants attention here. Having made a decision to establish an implementation team, leaders need to ensure resources are in place to:

- Ensure team members develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute to discussions about the content of the selected program or practice, to facilitate meetings, to understand change management and implementation science, and to use data to inform team decision-making.
- Allow the necessary time to convene teams and contain other demands on team members by helping them balance other responsibilities with the expectations of the team.
- Be clear about what team members should expect of each other (mutual accountability). Effective implementation decision-making requires that team members open up their own work to the scrutiny and input of colleagues, which can be uncomfortable and therefore requires leadership support and encouragement.

subject matter expertise and if the team members could leverage their individual competencies to benefit the whole team. Team members that represented various stakeholder groups affected by the initiative were likewise critical to giving "voice and choice" to stakeholders who were not part of the team. In addition, team members needed to demonstrate sufficient formal or informal leadership to commit resources, honor timelines, and represent their constituencies. It was paramount that team members had the influence and credibility to make and carry out the team's decisions.

An important consideration concerned the number of team members. While there was no magic number, ACCWIC found that the team's size should take into account: 1) diverse perspectives and abilities, and 2) productive and meaningful interactions to accomplish the work. It could be tempting to expand the team's size to include individuals who simply needed to be "in the know." Conversely, it could be tempting to establish a small team of just the "chosen few" – such as individuals fully supportive of the change initiative, individuals with a proven track record, or individuals who were seen as easy to work with. Instead, it was important to regard implementation teams as working groups whose members were to actively debate ideas, constructively challenge one another, problem solve, plan, and contribute in productive ways.

Facilitating a Team's Initial Formation

The second key stage of establishing an implementation team occurred after identification and selection of team members. This stage centered on team formation. In the six states where ACCWIC provided implementation consultation, there was a prevalent lesson on the importance of holding at least one or two initial meetings to foster the team's shared understanding of:

- Purpose and expectations.
- Goals of the change initiative and relevance to the organization's vision, mission, and values.
- Problem or need being addressed by the initiative, and why the initiative was the right solution.
- Program, practice, or intervention being implemented.
- Change management frameworks, strategies, and tools to be used by the team.

ACCWIC discovered that team members often came to the table without sufficient awareness and understanding of the change initiative. Some team members were even skeptical of the initiative. Soliciting team members' questions, concerns, and doubts during initial team meetings not only helped set a clear path for considering the larger context in which the team was to do its work, but also modeled that it was acceptable for team members to express various perspectives. Prior to beginning actual work tasks, members needed to have sufficient exposure to and understanding of the reason and intention for the work. This awareness enabled teams to launch constructively and focus more squarely on identifying, carrying out, and achieving the tasks that needed to be undertaken. A common vision was essential. If team members are "not pulling in the same direction, they will find themselves pulling apart – and eventually the team will fall apart" (Kornegay, 2014).

Team Charter

Each implementation team wrote a customized team charter. The charter served to clarify the team's purpose and scope, roles and responsibilities, and communication processes, as well as the establishment and use of subcommittees. As team members discussed drafts of the charter and reached consensus on a final version, they determined, and practiced, how the team would act, make decisions, resolve conflict, and relay information. The development process also served to reveal the degree of readiness among team members to engage meaningfully and champion the change initiative. A charter alone could not guarantee team health. Indeed, some initial charters proved to be hollow agreements because team members made only superficial commitments or the charters did not accurately reflect team members' expectations.

Charters were not static documents. Implementation teams found it helpful to review and revise them periodically, especially if their organizations were less accustomed to teamwork, to ensure they accounted for the realities and evolution of both the team and the change initiative. In addition, as others have noted in the literature, charters were useful for orienting new team members to the team's aims and work (Permanency Innovations Initiative, 2013).

Team Leader

ACCWIC found that implementation teams needed an effective team leader to be successful. Ideally, this was a full-time, dedicated position. Realistically, however, some team leaders continued to hold their regular positions in the agency.

Implementation team leaders played a unique role. Often, they had to lead a cross-functional team whose members did not report to them. With their supervisor and the agency's leader, they needed to anticipate resistance and tension when teams operated across reporting hierarchies. The lack of formal or hierarchical authority over individual team members meant that team leaders needed to know how to lead with influence, not authority. This required sophisticated skills in relationship building, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and compromise. In addition, team leaders needed to be able to translate the vision of agency leaders into the team's day-to-day work. This meant they had to have sufficient subject matter knowledge to harness the expertise of team members, be a fair and honest broker of diverse perspectives and opinions, be a strong facilitator and communicator, and be well-respected by others in the organization. Team leaders were most effective when they did not try to direct or order but instead provided guidance to help the team achieve its goals and make decisions. Other factors critical to strong team leadership were:

- *Ability to conduct productive meetings.* ACCWIC observed that unproductive meetings resulted in team members' disengagement, silence during meetings, and sometimes attrition. Preparing and distributing agendas and materials prior to meetings ensured that team members knew what to expect and could come prepared to participate. Timely distribution of meeting notes and next steps also demonstrated that team members were heard and that follow-up actions would occur.
- *An active, supportive relationship with the agency's leader.* It was critical for implementation team leaders to have regular, open access to the agency's leader. Team leaders needed a sounding board to resolve problems, strategize, and keep the tasks of the change initiative aligned with the agency's overall strategic direction.

An Infrastructure of Subcommittees

Implementation teams often managed the scope and complexity of their responsibilities by assigning specific target areas and tasks to subcommittees. Subcommittees included implementation team members as well as other non-team member stakeholders. Examples of subcommittee target areas were communication, training, policy, and data and evaluation. Subcommittees provided continuity, structure, and greater accountability for the actual work that the implementation team was charged with, often due to their greater meeting frequency and explicit assignment of and follow-through on tasks. A common challenge, however, was making sure tasks were integrated across subcommittees. This challenge was met when subcommittees were diligent and proactive in reviewing and sharing their respective work

plans, discussing redundancies and gaps, and elevating concerns to the implementation team when necessary. In addition, it was important to recognize that workloads across subcommittees often fluctuated. This was due to the nature of the work -- multi-faceted and sometimes sequential -- and to the natural progression of a change initiative in which some areas required greater time and attention than others at specific stages. In ACCWIC's experience, leadership acknowledgment of this fluctuation was critical to maintaining team momentum and morale.

Team Evolution and Ongoing Orientation

There is copious literature on team progression and lifecycles, and ACCWIC's experience aligned with descriptions of teams going through various stages of development. At different points in the implementation projects, ACCWIC found that teams needed to adjust membership to respond to emerging needs or new directions and to address natural attrition. An important lesson concerned the need to orient and guide new team members on team goals, the relationship between goals and the larger organizational vision, and the individual member's role in supporting the team. Ongoing attention to team membership ensured the continued presence of complementary knowledge, skills, and expertise.

Build the Bench

Budget cuts, staff turnover, and retirements have resulted in fewer child welfare agency staff members from which to draw implementation team members. In many of ACCWIC's partner state agencies, the same people were asked to serve on several different committees, workgroups, and teams at the same time. When the "bench" is shallow or when key players appear over-extended, efforts should be made to build the capacity of other staff members by having them serve on subcommittees and take on new roles. ACCWIC found that engaging staff members with varying degrees of knowledge, skills, and abilities was a promising strategy for investing in their capacity.

Decision-Making Authority and Accountability

One of the more vexing challenges in establishing an implementation team was determining the scope of decision-making authority that agency leaders would grant it. ACCWIC found that agency leaders needed to balance/acknowledge the following:

- An implementation team should not be deemed a substitute or shadow of the agency's executive/senior team; it is a separate entity, even if there are shared members. The senior leadership team must be willing to delegate some decision-making authority to the implementation team. Likewise, the implementation team must respect the decision-making authority retained by the senior leadership team.
- The decision-making authority assigned to the implementation team must be commensurate with the accountability expected. Holding a team accountable without granting it sufficient authority to move work forward will undermine its success.

Decision-making pathways needed to be established so that decisions reserved by executive leaders were made in a timely manner with sufficient information and then communicated back to the team. Explicit, clear communication and reporting procedures needed to be established at the onset. Decisions that were made behind closed doors, outside the realm of either the executive/senior team or the implementation team, engendered confusion and bad will.

A Simple Technique for Team Decision Making

One state's implementation team adopted a simple but well-received polling technique to facilitate action and movement on proposed decisions and to keep implementation moving forward:

- "thumbs-up" indicated agreement or, at the least, acceptance of the proposed decision
- "thumbs-down" indicated an inability to endorse the proposed decision; team members signifying this were expected to articulate an amendment or new proposal that they could "thumbs-up"
- "thumbs-sideways" indicated a need for clarification or information to be addressed before team members could endorse a decision

This polling technique gave team members an efficient, straightforward way to understand one another's positions and concerns, acknowledge conflicts, and make decisions. Above all, it demonstrated the team's willingness to express or expose their concerns or disagreements and communicate openly about issues, options, and recommendations.

Trust

Trust among team members was critical to open and honest communication. At any point, a member might need to ask for help completing an assigned task or risk providing unpopular feedback. Trust takes time to build; members coming together on the team might have had a history with each other that shaped whether and how much they were willing to trust each other. Trust was earned (or lost) over time as members saw evidence of one another's commitment and capability to accomplish the shared goals. The team leader played a critical role by setting a strong example and building a team culture of open communication.

Inevitably, team members held different levels of formal authority and status in their agency's hierarchy. Some members were in a formal reporting relationship while serving together on the implementation team where the emphasis was on peer-to-peer interactions and joint decision-making. The team needed to be a safe place for its members to behave as equals without concern of repercussions outside team meetings.

"If the team is not empowered to say what they believe or trust the others in the group, then they are not a team" (ACCWIC Project Director).

Sunsetting the Team

Supporting the team extended to the completion and celebration of its accomplishments. Once the change initiative's new practices are implemented fully, the team should evaluate whether and when its efforts and capacities can be incorporated into ongoing agency routines and regular leadership and management structures. At this point, the implementation team should transition from a "special" team that is focused on a specific change initiative into being institutionalized within regular agency practice. This means embedding the habits, behaviors, and mindsets of teamwork into the agency, not necessarily preserving the team.

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