

Leading the Way:

The Child Welfare Director's Role in Implementation

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Leading implementation in child welfare agencies and systems is exciting and challenging work. Leaders must have a clear and consistent vision, be able to marshal organizational supports, and inspire their staff to undertake the hard, sometimes risky, work of changing practice. Leadership vision is a more effective catalyst for organizational change when a framework that supports others in operationalizing the vision guides it. The Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC) drew from the National Implementation Research Network's implementation science framework to guide its work with agency leaders and their implementation teams in planning and implementing practice changes and achieving desired outcomes. A central strategy was the use of implementation teams, described in ACCWIC's issue brief *From Start to Finish: Child Welfare Implementation Teams that Go the Distance*.

The following lessons come from five years of implementation work in six states, which included intensive collaboration with the state agencies' child welfare directors, as described in the sidebar (last page). Some of these lessons surfaced at the outset, while others became apparent after significant trial and error.

Leadership Style and Presence Set the Tone

Show Up

Your leadership style and presence set the tone for the implementation effort. Multi-year implementation projects that change the work of staff throughout the agency and community are hard, under the best circumstances. Sustaining energy and focus over time requires the active engagement and support of the agency leader. Across ACCWIC's implementation projects, there were frequently times when the agency leader's attention was diverted by organizational crisis or apparent shifting priorities. The result was that the implementation team's work stalled, as team members lacked the trust and confidence that their leader was invested enough to continue to support and resource the project.

- ◆ Clearly and frequently make the case yourself for the change being implemented. Staff need to see and hear from you.
- ◆ Engage and develop others, such as middle managers and key stakeholders, to help champion the change.
- ◆ Demonstrate your knowledge of the model/practice to be implemented as well as the key principles of implementation science. If you don't know it, learn it.
- ◆ Maintain a spotlight on the implementation plan, receive regular progress updates, and actively highlight progress in organizational communications. This is especially important during the inevitable agency crises.
- ◆ Work tirelessly to eliminate organizational barriers such as siloed divisions failing to collaborate or inadequate resource allocation.
- ◆ Cultivate an organizational environment that promotes continuous quality improvement, open discussion, and effective problem solving.
- ◆ Highlight progress and celebrate key implementation milestones such as: launching implementation in the field, completing pilot phases, achieving fidelity to practice, or meeting desired outcomes.

Anticipate and Manage Change

During the course of each ACCWIC project, the child welfare agency director changed, in some cases up to three times. Both departing and incoming leaders are responsible for managing the impact that the transition has on any large-scale implementation underway. As a new leader taking the reins of the agency, manage your transition into the role so that you can become the visible leader of the change initiative.

- ◆ Understand that you have a key role in ensuring the continuity of initiatives that began before you joined the organization.
- ◆ Ask the implementation team leader to brief you on the project's desired results, current status, statutory/regulatory relationships, and resource commitments.
- ◆ Build on work underway, as much as possible, and communicate your support for implementation efforts.
- ◆ Respect and recognize the value of the ongoing implementation work to internal and external stakeholders.
- ◆ Understand the stage of the implementation project and the leadership actions needed to support the efforts in this and future stages.

Build and Support an Implementation Team

Implementation of large-scale change typically requires an implementation team because of the high degree of coordination and collaboration required across agency functions, the sheer volume of work to be done, and the diverse skills and perspectives needed.

- ◆ Select a multi-disciplinary team to manage the implementation process.
- ◆ Use your own participation strategically to help the team move forward.
- ◆ Assign a team leader (a.k.a. project director), clarify the decision pathways, grant the appropriate level of authority, and empower him/her to act.
- ◆ Develop a positive working relationship with the project director.
- ◆ Use the selection of implementation team members as an opportunity to develop the skills of emerging leaders in the organization. Build the bench.

Set and Communicate Clear Expectations

Even with an implementation team and team leader in place, it is critical that you do not delegate or abdicate responsibility for communicating and reinforcing your vision for change. It is your role to ensure that employees throughout the organization are continually reminded of the organization's strategic direction and priorities.

- ◆ Continually align the change with other initiatives and with daily operations. Operations work is the backbone of the organization; it must continue but not hamper new implementation efforts. Understand and communicate how the new initiative being implemented will align with other essential operations in the organization.
- ◆ Maintain flexibility and demonstrate a creative approach to problem solving.
- ◆ Make timely decisions on adjusting strategy, securing resources, and enhancing project capacity to support the implementation process.
- ◆ Be transparent. Tell the implementation team how decisions will be made.
- ◆ Put everything in context. Share your rationale and relate it to the daily work and the vision. Clarify individual, team, and organizational benefits.

Cross the Finish Line

Completing a change initiative is as important as starting one. Once the new practices are fully implemented, agency leaders should work with the implementation team to determine how the team's responsibilities can be incorporated into ongoing agency routines and regular leadership and management structures. Just as the new practice becomes a matter of routine, so should the implementation team's work.

- ◆ Ensure that evidence of successful implementation is clearly articulated at the outset of the initiative.
- ◆ Demonstrate commitment to sustaining the improved practice and the implementation capacity that was built.
- ◆ Work with the implementation team to assess implementation status and determine when to close out the work of the team.
- ◆ When the implementation team is officially disbanded, hold a formal celebration of its accomplishments.

A Final Consideration: Leaders are Public Stewards

Child welfare agency directors play a unique role in implementing change. A director's tenure is often not as long as the entire implementation process, from design to sustainability. Inspiring and supporting agency staff and stakeholders to realize the promise of practice change and better outcomes requires that directors act as true public stewards of the vital agencies that they are privileged to lead.

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.

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Additional resources

Arena, C. & Loysen, S. (2014). *A guide for the child welfare workforce: Supporting learning and change through on-the-job coaching*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children.

Arena, C. & Loysen, S. (2014). *A practice profile of child welfare workforce coaching*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children.

Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center
<http://www.family.umaryland.edu/accwic-home>

Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (2013). *Coaching in child welfare two-day training curriculum*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children.

Bright, C., Steward, R., Fitzgerald, M. & Arena, C. (2014). *Making data meaningful: Using data to support implementation in child welfare*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children.

Child Welfare Information Gateway
<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

Maciolek, S., Arena, C., Fisher, C. & Helfgott, K. (2014). *From start to finish: Child welfare implementation teams that go the distance*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Ruth H. Young Center for Families and Children.

National Implementation Research Network
<http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/>

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