

BEYOND QUICK FIXES: WHAT WILL IT REALLY TAKE TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE IN AMERICA?

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Paper Three: Effective Agency Leadership in a Changeable Environment

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Preamble: This is the third in a series of articles regarding the current status of child protection services in the United States and proposals to address its challenges. For decades, state and local agencies have struggled to provide the appropriate quality of responsive child protective services. Untold dollars have been spent at every level of government in an effort to protect children and, at the same time, address issues within the family structure that may put a child at risk of maltreatment. Too often, the system's efforts to improve or correct the perceived deficiencies within an agency have been misdirected, misguided, or even inappropriate.

These articles are designed to identify specific issues, analyze typical or traditional responses to those identified issues, and propose fundamental and substantially new alternatives to addressing the issues faced by child protective agencies. It is important to note that no single recommendation will provide substantial improvement in the quality of response and services. The system is far too complicated and interrelated for a single improvement to successfully advance the system for any length of time. These articles must necessarily be integrated to allow for substantial transformation, which will be real, meaningful and long-lasting.

THE CHILD WELFARE LEADER'S UNIQUE CHALLENGE

When a tragic event or a series of tragic events occurs within a child protection agency's jurisdiction, agency leadership is immediately scrutinized. Over the past four years, dozens of child protection leaders have left their roles because of media criticism over a tragic event or series of events. Child protection jurisdictions as varied and widespread as Massachusetts, Texas, Kentucky, Las Vegas, New York City, Los Angeles, Florida and Tennessee – to name only a few – have experienced the criticisms that contribute to a lack of confidence in or support for the executive officer in those jurisdictions. Virtually no other agency of government has suffered similar widespread and consistent criticism.

Every child is precious and valuable and any tragic event is cause for reflection and evaluation. But the nature and intensity of that criticism deserves review and comment. The focus typically brought on the leadership of the agency and, in particular, on a specific agency employee has tremendous long-term and often negative implications for the very services and system that are in place to protect vulnerable children. What is clear and has been documented is that media criticism leading to the resignation of an agency leader has unintended and, in some cases, extremely detrimental consequences for the agency's policies and practices as well as the actions taken by child protection workers. In one example, after the Los Angeles Times heavily criticized the LA County child protection system to the point where the director resigned, the newspaper subsequently published an editorial indicating that the consequences of the director's departure were that more children were removed from their homes and fewer children were returned home; the newspaper acknowledged that these events harmed children.ⁱ

When a leader resigns after improving the outcomes and metrics of his or her agency, that progress may unravel. In fact, a great number of child protection leaders who left their agencies under some degree of criticism had performed extremely well – **tremendously improving the services, outcomes, metrics, and standards of the system by having a vision, mission, and qualities of leadership that provided transformational and transitional improvement** over an extended period of time.

When those few tragic events occur and the leader resigns, all of those improvements are brought into question. The public criticism of the leader causes agency staff to return to the prior services and programs that did not provide positive data and metrics – the very programs that led to the appointment of that leader and the transformation to the successful administration of the agency. The negative impact on the operation, systemic functioning, and morale of the staff remaining with the agency cannot be overstated. Punitive criticism based upon singular or series of events should not outweigh the good work and improvement that may have occurred prior to negative events.

Given the high likelihood that tragic events will continue to occur in child protection jurisdictions, how do we prevent the predicament of these tragic events from negatively impacting child protection leadership and progress that has been achieved under that leadership? The first and most important conclusion is

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the choice of an effective leader for child protection. The second is that the leader must have steady and long-standing support. The stakeholders of the child protection system must work together to achieve realistic goals as formulated by the leader and acknowledge that tragic events are likely to occur under any child protection leaders tenure.

CHOOSING A LEADER – CRITERIA FOR SELECTION

In a changeable environment with a high likelihood of negative events, positive stakeholder perception of the choice is critical to the selection of the leader of a child protection agency. In making the choice, the executive officer responsible for a child protection agency must

- a. understand the significance of leadership, particularly during a period of criticism;
- b. have a sense and pulse of the agency itself and the leadership;
- c. know and understand the qualities of leadership that make a child protection agency leader successful; and
- d. very clearly set out the terms and conditions of support for the agency leader, not only when the leader is appointed, but also during the leader's tenure, specifically when the leader is under scrutiny.

The candidate for leadership of a child protection agency must meanwhile have a clear understanding of

- a. his or her vision and a focus or direction for staff to follow;
- b. the difference between leadership and management, resulting in the appointment of a strong management team to support the leader;
- c. effective communication with key stakeholders, including the chief executive officer (governor, mayor, or county executive officer), budget officials, staff (middle-management and line staff), the media, and providers;
- d. data and metrics that can demonstrate improvement and transformation, recognizing that these metrics will not provide a successful defense to harsh criticism;
- e. child welfare agency fundamentals which are critical to success, including caseload, workload, data integrity, data and fiscal accountability; and
- f. how to manage through crisis and conflict.

The candidate for leadership of the agency need not have extensive knowledge and understanding of the child protection and child welfare system. The system is far too complex and intricate to expect extensive expertise in the field. Also, the agency leader need not have child protection nor social services background by training or experience. Until the 1990s, child protection leaders commonly rose from within the ranks of the agency itself.ⁱⁱ More recently, a trend has begun to appoint leaders from outside the field, indicating that a strong leader may be increasingly perceived as more effective than an internal candidate with direct and extensive knowledge of the child protection system.

FIVE TENETS FOR SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

Change is inevitable in any child welfare setting. New research, new evidence-based practices, and new insights into issues of family dynamics, brain development, drug and alcohol treatment, and hundreds of other programs and processes will continue to evolve. The appointment of a new leader brings with it the responsibility to embrace this dynamic as a means to improving or transforming the agency. To that end, five primary tenets will help a new agency leader succeed in driving his or her mission and vision in a continually changing environment: passion, visibility, knowledge, priorities, and time.

Five Primary Tenets:

- *Passion*
- *Visibility*
- *Knowledge*
- *Priorities*
- *Time*

Tenet No. 1: Passion

Almost nothing evokes more passion than a discussion about abuse and neglect of children. This is multiplied exponentially when that discussion occurs around the fatality of a child. The individuals associated with the child protection system in almost every sense will bring that passion to every meeting, conference, budget discussion or program and service. Often, any discussion or debate is co-opted by the phrase, "I/we care about kids." Passion surrounds and often consumes the dialogue, debate, and process.

Chief Executive Officer:

- *Meet with Agency Leader*
- *Appearances*
- *Data Review*
- *Recent Initiatives*
- *Meet with Staff*
- *Keynote Addresses*

Children in care must be safe, healthy, educated, and have the resources and capacity within the systems to become productive and functioning citizens of that community. The leader of a jurisdiction must be able to articulate and delineate the direction and degree of passion for children in care as he/she establishes goals and makes commitments to the public on what will be done for these children and the community as a whole. Maintaining a continuing presence regarding children and family issues and supporting the leader of the agency as transformation and improvements occur not only reinforces the commitment and promises made by the chief executive officer, but also increases trustworthiness and loyalty while reinforcing the efforts made by the leader of the agency.

There are multiple ways in which a chief executive officer of a jurisdiction can demonstrate passion and commitment toward children and families in the community, including

- frequent and regular meetings with the child protection agency leader and sharing of information and details about the progress of the transformation;
- regular appearances before important stakeholders such as advocates, providers, funding sources, media representatives and legislature, expressing knowledge and support for agency initiatives;
- regular review of the data and metrics, increasing knowledge of the important improvements and those areas needing continuing improvement;

- knowledge of important recent initiatives that receive attention and even controversy – issues such as alternative or differential response, human trafficking, family preservation, predictive analytics, Child and Family Service Review, etc;
- visits and meetings with agency line staff such as case managers and middle-management; and
- keynote addresses to conferences and meetings involving stakeholders in the jurisdiction.

The leader of the agency has an equal or greater responsibility than the jurisdiction chief executive officer to not only have but to exhibit passion for the child protection system and the children and families it serves. Because so many of the individuals working for or associated with the child protection system are committed to and passionate about children's issues, there is an expectation that the leader will have an equal or greater sense of passion and commitment to the goals of protecting children and saving families. Therefore, the leader must be prepared in every way possible to display that passion and encourage others to support the vision and mission.

Agency Leader:

- *Vision*
- *Staff Communication*
- *Stakeholder communication*
- *Government stakeholders*
- *Learn trends*
- *Slogan/motto*

One complicating factor regarding passion is that there are significant administrative and ancillary responsibilities that do not directly demonstrate the passion held by the agency leader. Sometimes this is due to the organizational structure of the agency being part of a larger umbrella organization (this will be addressed in a future white paper). Often that organizational structure includes responsibility for TANF, Medicaid, child care, housing, and other family support services. While these are critical for the support of children and families, they are far more administrative in responsibility than the child protective services model.

Passion certainly has its benefits but it also has its issues. It can sometimes be overwhelming, too convicting, threatening, or even overbearing. The issue then for leader is, as with most things, "all things in moderation." Having commitment and dedication to the agency, its staff, and its mission will naturally evoke respect and admiration. The challenge is to maintain a balance. On some occasions, passion can be interpreted as controlling rather than advocating. In other instances, failure to exhibit the appropriate amount of passion may be interpreted as a lack of commitment or belief in what is being advocated at the time. The leader must recognize that having chosen the appropriate direction and focus through the vision and mission, a willingness to compromise that passion and choice may equal a lack of commitment and belief in those things being advocated.

There are a number of ways in which the leader of a child protection agency can demonstrate passion and commitment toward children and families in the community:

- develop, publish, and advocate a vision and mission that are clear and certain;
- communicate regularly and often with staff so they also become advocates for the agency;

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- c. communicate regularly and often with important stakeholders so they know the direction and progress that is made and can be supporters and advocates;
- d. ensure frequent communication with important stakeholders in government such as the jurisdiction chief executive officer, budget staff, legislative members, media, courts, and advocates and community organizations throughout the jurisdiction so that the communities can become advocates;
- e. participate beyond the jurisdiction to learn what is occurring elsewhere to advocate for the agency and the jurisdiction and its improvements; and
- f. develop a slogan or motto that is easily understood and transferable, that can be used by everyone to describe the agency activities, and that can become the linchpin of the passionate advocacy of the leader.

Tenet No. 2: Visibility

One of the agency leader's primary responsibilities is to be visible and available. This is much more challenging in practice than in theory. Often the leader's initial actions and activities are accepted and supported during what is typically known as the "honeymoon" period. This may last for six months, one year or longer, or may not occur at all. The 'honeymoon' may create a false sense of security and support, when in fact, once this period is over or a series of tragic events or circumstances occurs, the leader's visibility and openness will be questioned.

Many who gain the position of the leader of an agency will already have a clear understanding of the responsibilities of leadership and have developed a particular style of leadership. The appointment of a new leader is often met with praise and support, as it should be.

The leader's responsibility is to function consistently by being visible and available, advocating with passion, and being as good a listener as a speaker.

It is often followed by the honeymoon, then by alternating support and criticism, and, finally, too often, frequent and almost universal criticism. This is often the response to change and particularly transformation change. The leader's responsibility is to function consistently by being visible and available, advocating with passion, and being as good a listener as a speaker.

Three main audience categories that an agency leader must regularly, frequently, and passionately address include 1) the internal audience, 2) lateral audiences, and 3) external audiences.

1. **Internal audience.** The leader must clearly understand that the success of the agency depends upon its staff. A new leader often brings a new vision and emphasis that must be developed, communicated, and incorporated within the culture of the agency. Communicating that vision and supporting its implementation is a critical responsibility of the leader. This means meeting with staff at every level on a regular basis and communicating with

Internal:

- Staff newsletter
- Event/activity
- Staff achievements
- Webcast to staff
- Travel to staff

them on the actions, policies, and activities that occur regularly within the agency. The leader must be mindful that most staff members have such overwhelming responsibility in their day-to-day work that they do not have adequate time to fully engage in the efforts of the leadership of the agency. Not only might they not 'see the forest for the trees,' they may not see a tree at all because their work requires them to constantly move forward, focused on the important efforts of working with children and families.

Some visibility activities that the agency leader should consider include

- a. regular newsletter or communication to all staff about agency activities;
 - b. a note or explanation from the director to the staff about a particular event or program;
 - c. use of email to recognize staff for things such as birthdays, births etc. or particular accomplishments supporting the actions of the staff through data and metrics;
 - d. use of webcasts or audiovisual communication on a regular basis to become more visible and recognized by the staff. As an example, one state director records a five-minute message every Monday that is emailed to all staff. In it, she simply talks about the past week, the weekend, and the coming week.
 - e. routinely traveling the jurisdiction, meeting and talking with staff about issues or events such as new legislation, budget issues, or programs being implemented.
2. **Lateral audiences.** Child protective services do not operate in a vacuum; there are a multitude of other services provided to children and families. Keeping in touch with other governmental agencies to ensure coordination and sharing of responsibilities becomes an important part of providing permanency and well-being for children and families. Interacting with agencies such as TANF, Medicaid, employment, housing, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, courts and a multitude of other federal, state, and local services is an everyday occurrence for many of the families that are served by child protection services. Being visible and available to those other agencies and particularly the leaders of those agencies can help coordinate and facilitate services to the children and families and avoid conflict if a crisis occurs.

Lateral:

- Other Government agencies
- Meet with Agency Leaders

The importance of system coordination cannot be overstated. Not only is it critical for the coordination of services and the sharing of resources, but it is particularly critical to ensure a full service array for families in crisis and children in need of services. The opportunity to meet regularly with other governmental leaders is available but often must happen by request and persistence. Too often, systems see only their own responsibilities and resources; isolated silos of service delivery have historically plagued virtually every level of government. Frequent visibility with other agency leaders can help agencies develop a rapport and the trust necessary to break through long standing barriers.

Nothing should be clearer to an agency leader than that change is inevitable, requiring adaptation and flexibility. Working with traditionally isolated agencies to break down barriers of communication and cooperation provides the opportunity for visibility through press conferences, press releases, and reports to funding and oversight committees.

3. **External audiences (outside stakeholders).** The child protection system and the juvenile and family courts are the long-time and traditional “privatizers” of services. They have long relied on outside service providers, both profit and not-for-profit, to create and provide resources for identified needs of children and families. They are also the traditional innovators, being more

External:

- *Know your outside stakeholders*
- *Communicate with them*
- *Share the vision with them*
- *Listen to them*

flexible and responsive to the changing needs that are often recognized at the local service level.

Outside stakeholders are literally too numerous and varied to mention with any hope of being inclusive of all important partners. For the purposes of this white paper, outside stakeholders include the following, in no particular order: foster parents, GAL/CASAs, home-based providers, residential

providers, child advocacy centers, parents’ attorneys, judicial representatives, media, service organizations, consultants, and system organizations such as foster parent associations, residential provider associations, and advocacy groups.

Each of these stakeholders has its own perspective, objectives, mission, and vision. The agency leader must communicate and be available to meet and share visions and needs. Many outside stakeholders want to do the very best that can be done for children and families and are willing to work diligently and cooperatively to provide the very best care. That said, the leader must recognize and understand that there is tension, sometimes healthy and sometimes not, between the agency and outside stakeholders. While the stated goal and objectives may be the same, at least by mission and vision, the goal and responsibility of outside stakeholders is to maintain operations and, ideally, to succeed financially from the working relationship with the agency. To the extent that the vision and mission as well as the application of the leader of the agency moves from one sector of stakeholders to another, there is a benefit and a threat to each that cannot be fully understood until it occurs. Leadership often means having to make difficult decisions and challenging choices. But being visible and communicating regularly with outside stakeholders may minimize the conflicts that occur from time to time.

Tenet No. 3: Knowledge

The child protection system is a complex and intricate system that requires a great deal of study, understanding, and patience. It constantly changes for a variety of reasons, but primarily because no single right answer exists for every case when dealing with human beings and emotions at highly sensitive times. Research has only recently begun to explore, define, and direct what works

and what doesn’t and in what situations. While detailed and experienced knowledge of the system may be helpful, the many variances and factors involved in leading an agency may outweigh any prior knowledge, while leadership skills become more critical. Studies of leadership have shown that knowledge of an industry or product does not necessarily make a successful leader; the qualities and application of the leader may be just as important.

While historically, the selection of agency leadership had been made from within the agency itself, more recently, jurisdiction chief executive officers have frequently looked outside of the agency for leadership. This shift may have occurred due to the highly public nature of a tragedy or crisis, the protectionism displayed by leaders who were experienced in such a confidential and intense environment, the need for a more businesslike approach from an operational and fiscal standpoint, or a variety of other reasons. Recent appointments of leadership in Michigan, Connecticut, Texas, New York City, Florida, to name a few, have shown that a detailed and experienced knowledge of the agency may not necessarily be required for effective and appropriate leadership.

The skills of leadership are often not necessarily connected with a business entity or product itself, but with the skills of effective leadership. Knowledge of the system can be gained through time, willingness, experience, and determination; virtually anyone considered for the position of leader of the child protection agency can exhibit those qualities. The issue of leadership is a much more refined and directed role that is most closely associated with having an appropriate vision and then working with others to convey and apply that vision. An effective leader can use the honeymoon period between his/her appointment and the time when he/she needs sufficient knowledge to explain a tragedy or crisis to successfully gain that knowledge.

The leader of an agency therefore must first and foremost be a tested and skilled leader. There can be no substitute or compromise when the selection of a new agency leader is made. Knowledge can be gained through a variety of sources with time and experience. Any new leader, even one from inside the agency, will have to spend a significant amount of time learning about not only the agency, but the issues that exist nationally, philosophically, and programmatically in other jurisdictions – local, state and federal, private, not-for-profit, academic, and scientific. Learning all of this could, itself, be a full-time job. The leader must find a way to study and acquire the knowledge that is important enough to spend his/her valuable time on – knowledge that will further the vision, mission, and responsibilities of the leader and the agency.

The topic of data and metrics has become significant within the child protection system. For several decades through State Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) and other requirements, agencies have collected incredible amounts of data that often have gone unused or misunderstood. Recent efforts have been made to improve the understanding and availability of data

Knowledgeable agency leader:

- *Know/hear the field*
- *Learn trends*
- *Be data rich*
- *Manage to data*

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and to manage from the data, but systems still have a long way to go to make this data useful and usable within the agency. The leader's understanding and use of data can help lead the agency so that others can more effectively manage the agency. In recent years, the federal government has reviewed agency data through a process known as the Children and Family Service Review (CFSR). This development has been very helpful in moving agencies to understand the importance of their data, but much work must be done before data management is a widely accepted and useful process within the agency itself. Only the agency leader can cause this to continue to improve in use and application.

Tenet No. 4: Priorities

A child protection agency has dozens if not hundreds of policies, programs, practices, directions, and initiatives that deserve and require attention and decisions. Regardless of the size of the agency, by staff or location, the multitude of decisions every day is complex

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and compelling. Decisions may range from the most significant to the most inconsequential but each one has an impact on the effectiveness and the perception of the agency. This is particularly true and compelling for a new agency leader. Everyone will be looking at the leader's early decisions to evaluate the direction, focus, and commitment of the leader. This decision requirement will occur virtually immediately. It may begin with the selection of an executive management team, the development of the vision and mission, the application of the traditional policy or practice, the implementation of a new policy or practice, the venue for the first "policy" speech, or something as subtle as whether or not there is an open door policy for the leader or where some people are assigned to their office.

Often, the appointment of a new agency leader coincides with a new administration at the local or state level, a new legislative session, a budget cycle year, and, too frequently, occurs during a crisis from the past few months or with a new crisis just unfolding.ⁱⁱⁱ During any and all of these situations, the leader will be required to establish priorities for the agency and particularly for the leader's agenda – which is why it is so important for the leader to have a vision and mission.

Frequently the issues that are required to be addressed as priorities are those that have been brought to the public's attention and are of interest to the chief executive officer of the jurisdiction. Priorities may be driven by a tragedy or crisis requiring immediate attention. The leader must always consider whether addressing those public issues is consistent with the vision and mission established for the agency. It is not unusual for the new leader to be required to respond to a tragedy such as a fatality which may affect the reputation and credibility of the agency. The real issue may have more to do with a particular policy or practice and its implementation. For example, case transfer and case worker turnover increases caseloads to the point where it is nearly impossible for local staff to perform their duties as required. While it would be important and a priority to

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address the tragedy or crisis, doing so cannot compromise the vision and mission which will serve not only the long-term interests of the community and families, but will also serve to ensure the long-term effectiveness of the agency itself.

Leadership then has the significant responsibility of determining the focus and direction that the agency will take and then determining the priorities that will get the agency there. The leader may encounter several problems in this process: there is no perfect roadmap for turnaround of an agency; the resistance to change in any fashion, even for a failing system, is real and significant; when dealing with children and families, there is tremendous pressure politically, financially, publicly and internally; and, given the constantly changing nature of everything associated with child protection, the priorities necessarily are fluid and ever-changing, to a degree.

Therefore, the following principles should be considered and balanced with the significant responsibilities of the new leader:

1. **Turnaround for an Agency.** While there is no perfect roadmap for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of an agency, in part because every agency seems to be designed differently and around different political environments and financial circumstances, there are several issues that the leader must address to provide any sense of effectiveness or efficiency. The primary of those is to look at the core foundation of the agency itself, determining primarily if there are, within reasonable parameters, sufficient staff to do the job, not marginally or perfunctorily, but well. Looking at data can help the leader understand and manage to this problem but disclosing or addressing this problem has its own implications, such as
 - a. funding capacity and commitment by the jurisdiction;
 - b. how quickly staff can be hired if that is an issue;
 - c. the degree of capacity of middle-management to manage well to the vision and mission;
 - d. the capacity to support the caseworkers in the community;
 - e. the political will to support any investment without some assurance of the positive return to that investment; and
 - f. the ability to effectively manage the resistance to change and improvement of the prior system.

Turnaround:

- *Funding*
- *Hiring staff*
- *Managing to change*
- *Local support*
- *Political will*
- *Addressing resistance*

All of this takes significant evaluation and commitment at the most inopportune time – with new leadership, during a crisis, in the legislative session, during the budget process. The need to

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prioritize and implement the new vision and mission is often the most challenging and difficult, requiring support and advice from outside the jurisdiction.

2. **Resistance to Change.** With any new agency leader or administration, change is inevitable. It is unlikely that there has ever been an administrative change where the goal and mantra is “everything is going well and we don’t need to change anything.” Change is inevitable and change is inevitably resisted. As Machiavelli said, “It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institution and merely lukewarm defenders in those who gain by the new ones.”^{iv} Understanding that is critical to preparing for the priorities in the responses to the change that a new leader will bring about.

Resistance to change:

- *Inevitability of resistance*
- *Disruptive innovation*

One book about the topic of change and how to respond that deserves particular attention is *Disruptive Innovation*.^v It clearly sets out the responses to change and the need for all parties – those responsible for bringing about the change and those who are affected by that change – to prepare to address the issues. What can be disheartening is to believe or suspect that the resistance to change has nothing to do with what is best for children and families and has more to do with a monetary consideration for either or both parties involved in the change. The best change scenario is one in which everyone focuses on the best interests of children. Compromises notwithstanding, **the best interests of children should be central to any change strategy.**

The leader of the agency and chief executive must clearly understand the change or transformation will likely incite resistance. Often the resistance will come from those who have some vested and/or financial interest in the current system which the change is impacting. Therefore the leader of the agency and the chief executive must clearly expect the resistance will be extensive and complex. It will include communication from the system, organization, or individual being impacted by the change to the media, local support group, legislative body or others. Expect criticism if change and transformation is the goal.

3. **Commitment to and Focus on Children and Families.** Agency turnaround and system change will meet resistance. This is why developing and publicizing a vision and mission is so critical. Once the vision and mission have been established and are clearly conveyed to the jurisdiction and community, the responsibility of the leader becomes clear – demonstrate that the improvements and changes for turnaround meet the vision and mission while

Commitment to children:

- *Vision for change*
- *Consistent message*
- *Always about children*

servicing children and families appropriately. Those resisting change will try to refocus the dialogue and affect the changes through a variety of means – pointing out inconsistencies in

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the message and the implementation, claiming that leadership and the agency intend to make changes only to save money for the chief executive officer, claiming the old system has been effective and helped children for years, and saying there is no evidence that moving in this direction will do what is claimed. These and other dialogues will be used in both the political and public settings to undermine the change and improvement.

In this environment, the leader must be visible and knowledgeable about the vision, mission, and priorities of the agency. The honeymoon period will initially support the process, at least publicly. What appears to be successful is to do as much as possible early. The obvious problem with this is connecting the early initiatives and the focus and commitment to those things that are consistent with the vision and mission while connecting them to what is best for children and families. With the movement toward evidence-based practices and the concern for well-being of children in addition to safety and permanency, the efforts by the leader become more significant in their presentation and more acceptable in their defense. The leader must always demonstrate that the turnaround is directed toward the best interests of children and families.

4. **Changing Priorities.** Once the vision and mission are established and the priorities are in place, the question of maintaining commitment to those priorities becomes a primary issue. The question ultimately of how committed the leader is to those priorities and the improvements will be raised through a variety of circumstances. Some may come from the legislative review of proposed changes in legislation, budgetary considerations on investment and return on investment, and use of the media to impact resistance to the change. The problem will not come about with one of the lower priorities of the leader and the agency but on one of the higher, more visible priorities.

Changing priorities:

- *Consistent priorities*
- *Ranking of priorities*
- *Stay the course*

For instance, if the leader determines a need for additional caseworkers and increased pay in order for agency turnaround, he/she may encounter resistance a) because budget considerations limit additional investment of funds for salaries or b) outside providers are concerned they will have fewer qualified applicants to choose from in filling their own vacancies. The issue may then be whether or not the legislature and/or the budget agency is prepared to support additional caseworkers or pay increases. The questions for the leader will be: is this the highest priority? If it is denied, what will the leader do? What will others think of the leader’s priorities? Are the priorities established really appropriate? These are not easy questions but connecting them to the best interests of children and families with a representation of a return on investment through data is the best approach in addressing the concern.

Tenet No. 5: Time

How much time is there to be successful? This is a critical question for a leader of a child protection agency. In most jurisdictions, there is a time limit by term limits. Very few agency leaders survive a change of administration. In addition, given the workload and intensity of the responsibilities of the leader, quick turnover of two years or less is not unusual. Given the limited time, which is often unknown, what can a leader accomplish and what is a leader expected to accomplish in a limited timeframe? This question is compounded by the fact that often large bureaucratic agencies do not quickly or easily adapt to the intended change to be implemented by the leader, regardless of the time frame.

Time:

- *Limited leadership time*
 - *Set time frames*
 - *To compromise or not?*
-

Often, the new leader of an agency arrives with tremendous credibility, support, and commitment for resources. After an initial grace period, the realization and the understanding of the

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changes needed and proposed, the funding necessary to support those changes, and the improving and changing philosophy of child protective services begins to take hold. The resistance then begins to cause reflection on the focus and priorities of the leadership in the agency. The need for the vision, mission, focus, agenda, and priorities becomes critical for the leader to succeed in the turnaround.

Timing is of course everything, so determining the timetable for action is an important step for the leader. It is typical to propose and to begin implementing a number of actions at the same time. Those must be reviewed for consistency of policy and practice as well as integration into practice by others. Again, there are some actions and initiatives which are critical to the nature of the vision and mission of the leader, for which implementation is the basis for any real improvement. There are other actions that are important, but not critical, and have an immediate and important impact on improvement. Only the leader and the management team are in a position to make these determinations, deciding which category – critical, important, and supportive – to assign to each action and initiative and how to respond when any of those initiatives in any of the three categories are questioned.

While starting off with credibility and support, the new leader must believe in the work that is being proposed and accomplished, otherwise, all support and credibility can be lost. Leadership always has the responsibility to determine what is important and what is not and the degree of the importance. Leadership also has to decide how to respond as important priorities or initiatives are questioned. There are some activities and proposals on the priority list that are so critical to the improvements that

any compromise will undermine their very effectiveness. In the business world, while negotiating for a particular project, it is not uncommon to arrive at the point where a BAFO (Best and Final Offer) is needed. At some point, agency leadership needs to be prepared to decide whether the failure to achieve a priority will preclude the ability to be successful in his/her strategy.

Only the leader, with advice from others, including the jurisdiction chief executive officer, has the responsibility to make that decision. Too often in the child protection system, the willingness to compromise undermines the very effectiveness or potential effectiveness of the improvements that have been advocated. There are certainly justifications for compromise on issues that are important and supportive of the direction and commitment of the leader, and therefore the willingness to compromise on those is a much easier choice. For those initiatives that are critical, the issue of compromise is much more challenging.

In the event, for instance, that a leader comes to the conclusion that having caseloads at a particular ratio is critical and without which the caseworkers have no hope of providing quality or meaningful care and protection for the child and family, the leader must commit to achieving that priority. Failure to achieve that priority means failure overall. **Sometimes the more difficult decision for a leader is not how much to compromise, but whether to compromise at all.**

Compromises may be easier to make after a period of time as opposed to at the beginning of the leader's tenure, when the passion, energy, and support is great. Maintaining the passion and commitment to the vision and mission and effectiveness after an extended period of time is challenging. Becoming comfortable in the role of leader and appreciating the challenges and responsibility often take control of the leader. Time tends to teach many things but it also tends to cloud others. A leader should never lose sight of the vision and mission and should

Balancing those three measurements – critical, important, and supportive – should always be communicated with the jurisdiction chief executive officer and stakeholders.

never lose the passion and commitment over time. Balancing those three measurements – critical, important, and supportive – should always be communicated with the jurisdiction chief executive officer and stakeholders. Finally, the leader should be constantly aware that his/her tenure is not permanent. The leader should well understand that being the temporary caretaker of a child protection agency is a gift not a right, a responsibility not a burden, and is time-limited, so he/she should work hard to get the job done.

CONCLUSION

Leadership of the child protection agency in a jurisdiction level is perhaps one of the most lonely and challenging positions in government. It requires energy and passion. It is a position in which all of the improvements and transformations that moved an agency from criticism to adulation can be lost with a single incident, through no fault of the agency. The position is time-limited for a variety of reasons and the leader has the responsibility to do as much as can be done, as quickly as can be done, and as best as it can be done within the limits of the agency's resources. At the end of the time as leader, it is reasonable to anticipate that there will be no significant show of appreciation or recognition. Ultimately, a leader in child protection should seek satisfaction in the recognition internally of a job well done and in the knowledge that during his or her period of time as leader, improvements were made and priorities achieved.

The success of a child protection agency depends upon the ability of its caseworkers to do their work efficiently and effectively, considering many factors such as hiring practices, training, mentoring, supervision, technology, and policies. Leadership can

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have a significant impact on these factors and on the agency's success. **A leader who has the vision, focus, tenacity, and commitment to lead others toward that vision is an absolutely essential and critical element, dictating whether an agency can successfully fulfill its mission.** Selecting and appointing that individual and then supporting that individual are critical to the success of an agency. Being in a leadership role is different from being an effective leader. Once selected, the agency leader must be able to communicate the vision and mission and inspire commitment from others. The leader must also be committed to remaining in that role to ensure the successful completion of the mission and vision.

BEYOND QUICK FIXES: WHAT WILL IT REALLY TAKE TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE IN AMERICA?

ENDNOTES

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