



Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance
Strengthening Families in the 21st Century

Leadership Guidance

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Leadership Definition

The field of public child welfare has a leadership philosophy that is outcome focused. Senior leadership establishes a compelling vision that sets direction and goals, plans and manages change, makes strategic decisions, garners resources, and builds political and community will. Leadership at all levels in the organization, including but not limited to the executive team, senior administrators, supervisors, child welfare workers, and support staff effectively communicates, builds trust, makes sound decisions and improves performance capacity and accountability to achieve clearly defined outcomes.

Overview

Positive outcomes for vulnerable children, youth and families are maximized when public child welfare agencies have effective leadership. It is leadership that sets the direction for the agency, defines clearly and explicitly how the organization operates day-to-day and aligns key processes, systems and capacities in support of the vision and culture. Leadership creates commitment, hope and confidence that the agency is able to perform at its best, consistently and over time, and in times of difficulty and crisis.

This guidance is addressed specifically to public child welfare directors and their immediate executive teams. It offers guidance on where leaders and their teams should spend their time and energy, how to assess and align critical key processes (e.g., human resources) to support the strategy of the agency, and how leadership is embedded and experienced throughout an agency.

The strategic work of leadership is to first understand the environment and context within which they are operating. The environment is complex, but need not be overwhelming. There are factors that all organizations hold in common and ones that are particular to government and public child welfare. Listed below are environmental factors that will affect the nature, timing and pace of leadership work identified in this critical area.

Environmental Factors

Sustainability

There are several factors that may affect the ability of leaders to achieve and sustain high performance. Directors may find the agency culture to be one of almost constant crisis due to child deaths or other performance issues. They may also find agencies that do not have in place (or do not honor) those processes needed to support continuous improvement; e.g., strategic plans, performance measures, decision-making protocols. Most critically, directors (with or without prior experience in public child welfare) may believe they have been charged or given license to make wholesale changes; that is, wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. All these conditions require the director to first assess current performance, understand how to use short-term issues in the service of longer-term objectives and to approach change systemically and systematically.

Service Delivery Disparities and Disproportionality

Disproportionality is a prevailing issue in child welfare, resulting from disparities. Disparities in treatment and services can result in less positive outcomes for different categories of children, particularly children of color. These disparities are often systemic in nature and long standing. In child welfare, disparities can come from multiple causes, including policies that are not written and administered well, lack of resources in particular communities, worker decision-making, etc. Disparities can also originate outside of child welfare, including unintended biased reporting from mandated reporters and racial inequities in society. How and when a director addresses this issue is as important as what steps are ultimately taken to remedy it. Leaders who make the most progress are open about the issue, frame it for the understanding of others, make the issue a priority, are rigorous in their analyses, develop a strategic plan for the elimination of disparities, and deal with it within a continuous improvement mindset, bring multiple stakeholders (e.g., mandated reporters, alumni, birth parents, etc.) to the table for partnership in fixing policies, programs, and practices and understand that fixing the issue will be neither fast nor easy. The pervasiveness of the disproportionality issue requires that leaders look through a “disproportionality and disparity lens” in every system improvement effort.

Crisis Management

There are a number of crises that can and do occur that invite intensified scrutiny by the public, the media, legislators and others. Responding to these requires the best of leadership precisely when leadership is most in question. Effective leaders are as open as possible about the nature of the issue and how they plan to address it. They accept accountability without blaming. They take pains not only to communicate personally with staff, but ensure that all levels of management are on the same page and sending the same messages. They move from crisis mode to one of continuous improvement as rapidly as possible and see that needed changes are, in fact, made. Leaders also help staff get through intensified public scrutiny by creating opportunities to tell the many good stories that reflect the positive impact of our work on children, youth and families.

Multiple Constituencies and Oversight

Public child welfare directors must negotiate often competing and conflicting values, objectives and priorities of the executive and legislative branches, community and advocacy groups, providers and the children, youth and families they are charged to serve. Public child welfare is also subject to significant federal, judicial, legislative and public oversight with each party often believing that their values, objectives and/or obligations should have first consideration. Achieving federal CFSR goals is one of the major challenges facing public child welfare directors. Effective leaders are able to work collaboratively and fashion a practice model that at a minimum gives due consideration to competing perspectives and at best rationalizes them comfortably within the agency's strategic plan.

Public-Private Partnerships

Public child welfare has appropriately and often effectively turned to the private and/or non-profit sectors to provide a range of services and goods to support positive outcomes for children, youth and families. Leaders may seek collaborative partnerships in the community, including cultural leaders, churches and other places of worship; and also through service systems such as education, mental health, health, and juvenile justice to tackle large issues such as disproportionality and disparate treatment. Effective leaders know these partnerships function at their best when the agency's "needs and wants" are clearly articulated and supported by data, have staff that is skilled in negotiating large and long-term contracts and have monitoring and corrective action processes in place that are rigorously applied and enforced.

Champions

Directors will find a number of stakeholders who care deeply about vulnerable children, youth and families, but public child welfare must be its own best champion. Effective leaders are adept at making their case to different stakeholders, including staff, in different venues and different formats. They are excellent at building coalitions and know when and how to use them to make or support their case.

Empowerment

Large bureaucracies, by their design, can cause staff to feel disaffected unless there is a conscious effort to create and maintain an open, empowered management style. In addition, the very nature of public child welfare work is trauma based and it is not uncommon for staff members that deal daily with trauma to feel increasingly traumatized themselves. Effective leaders move quickly to challenge and disrupt this pattern by setting clear work boundaries, providing timely and experienced supervision and fashioning processes that minimize isolation of staff, particularly in decision-making. They insist that the agency remain focused on children, youth and families and not on the system. And they insist, as part of expected

performance, that their senior managers actively demonstrate an empowered management style throughout the agency.

Organizational Maturity

Individual agencies will be at different levels of maturity in the design of their practice model, sophistication of their support functions and their ability to innovate and manage day-to-day operations. They generally have a “preferred” focus either for getting things done (tasks) or maintaining relationships. That is, they move issues without regard to the perceptions and effect on staff and children, youth and families or conversely, their primary consideration is whether staff and stakeholders will be “happy” about an intended action. Effective leaders know how to assess current maturity and fashion interventions that require appropriate balance between “task and relationship” work.

Politics

Public child welfare operates within a political context. Its needs, wants and desires are evaluated relative to where they fit within a gubernatorial or legislative agenda which may be in the hands of different parties. While some governors have made children’s issues top priorities, their attention is more often in other policy areas such as transportation, economic development and health care, issues they believe carry larger implications for the overall well-being of their citizens and voters. Effective public child welfare leaders find ways to frame their issues in terms and language that reflects the agenda of the governor or legislature. For example, on the issue of disproportionality, leaders can, if necessary, introduce legislation or support legislative change to prevent disparities and reduce disproportionality.

Budget and Finance

Public child welfare budgets are a complex mix of federal, state, local and private financing. In addition to maximizing revenue from all sources, directors need to assure governors and legislatures that they are good stewards of tax dollars. Budget requests for continuing or additional resources are made only with evidence of maximum staff productivity, efficient processes and service delivery, non-duplication of services and programs and positive outcomes for children, youth and families. Directors must also prepare for and be responsive to overall budget reductions due to economic downturns or changes in budget priorities triggered by new legislation, community advocacy or other environmental conditions.

Questions the Guidance Will Answer

- Why is leadership important and how does it affect outcomes for children, youth and families?
- What is the environment or context that leaders must understand and respond to in order to be effective?
- What are the major, overarching functions of leadership and what does the work involve?
- What are the critical leadership considerations in addressing the issue of disparities in treatment and outcomes of children of color?
- How are key processes designed and implemented (aligned) to support and reinforce the agency’s vision and culture?
- How is effective leadership demonstrated as it cascades through the organization?

Why is this Critical Area Important to the Field of Public Child Welfare?

- Many communities experience ambivalence and ambiguity about the role of public child welfare with calls for removal of children in times of crisis and, conversely, concern that too many children are removed from their families and for too long. Leadership is critical in building community understanding about the role of public child welfare and community trust that minimizes such pendulum swings.
- Public child welfare is increasingly a credible field as member agencies (individually and collectively) demonstrate that they can achieve positive outcomes for children, youth and families; do so with staff who are respected for their competence and compassion; and can meet necessary governmental obligations and expectations. Consistent and constant leadership is central to creating and sustaining high performance.
- Accountability for positive outcomes starts and ends with leadership. Leadership promotes and demands accountability and models the personal discipline expected of staff.
- Leadership is a specific body of work for which there are identifiable capacities, skills, and experiences. Leadership can be taught, demonstrated and evaluated. It provides the basis for self-reflection and self-assessment. Providing guidance offers new and tenured directors and their executive teams the opportunity to learn from a growing body of leadership knowledge and research and to progress more rapidly in their leadership ability.
- Leadership is critical to building and maintaining effective relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Leadership understands achieving positive outcomes for children, youth and families requires working with a range of stakeholders which share a common vision, commitment and investment.

How Will Outcomes be Achieved for and with Children, Youth and Families?

- Leadership is the act of influencing and driving the choices and actions of an organization to achieve positive outcomes for vulnerable children, youth and families.
- Leadership sets the vision and inspires staff to learn together and take actions to create a shared vision. It examines and, where necessary, challenges long held beliefs and assumptions. It supports ongoing efforts that are achieving positive outcomes and simultaneously seeks inventive and innovative ways to continuously improve performance.
- Leadership ensures equity, fairness and due process throughout the organization and addresses disparate treatment in policies, practices, and procedures that negatively affect outcomes for children, youth and families. Leadership models the skills, values and behaviors that inspire creativity, energy and investment.
- Leadership operates with a continuous improvement mindset and encourages and expects staff to take risks necessary to grow and develop.
- Leadership operates with both a short and long-term view; it speaks with authority and integrity even in the midst of crisis and in times of uncertainty.
- Leadership understands the complexity of the organization and what it takes to achieve results. Sound management practices are respected and tools and processes are well aligned with the vision.
- Leadership understands and respects the many achievements of the agency and builds on them.
- Leadership garners and maximizes resources and support from a range of private and public agencies, reinforcing the fact that public child welfare agencies “cannot go it alone.”
- Leadership allocates resources (e.g., money, staff and time) in support of the strategic goals of the organization and that maximize productivity and performance. Leadership uses a range of contracting options, as appropriate, and expects all service delivery to meet the same high standards.

Strategy

There is an increasing body of knowledge about the role and functions of leadership. Many studies, articles and books identify a range of attributes or competencies required to lead (e.g., “stay true to your style”) and most provide a list of tasks that leaders must tackle (e.g., “set boundaries”). The guidance provided below is taken from Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus¹. It was chosen because it provides a conceptual framework that incorporates the “to do” lists of numerous studies and packages them into four broad bodies of work. The categories make it easier to assess the current status of leadership work in an agency, understand the interdependence of the work and fashion strategies that advance leadership in more than one category. The term “management” should not suggest that the work is that of mid-management such as development of major systems (e.g., finance, human resources, and information). Rather the term reflects the direct and active engagement required of a leader. Vignettes are included to illustrate “lessons learned” by current or former public child welfare leaders.

The four categories are as follows:

- Management of Focus
- Management of Meaning and Expectations
- Management of Trust
- Management of Self

Management of Focus

Creating a vision is the most fundamental piece of leadership work. A vision serves to fix the attention and focus of the organization and is a public statement about what the agency is committed to do and for what it should be held accountable. It should be unequivocal and worthy of the significant energy, time and creativity required. It can be thought of as a touchstone that the organization can return to again and again to focus its work, set its expectations and priorities, design its programs and practices and engage its stakeholders and partners. It is seen as authentic and dynamic and staff can explain it and how their work supports it.

Assessing the Current Vision

Leaders should assess the extent to which the organization is currently guided by a strong vision. A number of key processes and practices can provide a basic “read” on the focus of the organization. How are budget priorities aligned, if at all, with the current vision? Does staff, particularly senior staff, refer to the vision in its deliberations and decision-making? Are negotiations, contracts and agreements based on a commonly shared vision? Are there multiple and/or competing visions operating in different situations and programs? Does the communication plan specifically address and reinforce the vision in various venues, situations and materials? Is the agency’s vision for public child welfare in sync with the visions of other critical stakeholders such as the legislature, governor or the umbrella agency CEO? Is the focus more on system issues (e.g., rules, working conditions) than children, youth and family outcomes? Is staff feeling overwhelmed with no sense they are making headway?

¹ Bennis, W. & Nanus, B. (1986). *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row

Creating a Vision

◆ Current Visions

Leaders who create a powerful agency vision do so mindful of previous or current visions operating in their agencies. Staff members have strong beliefs and assumptions, often subconscious, which guide how they perform; that is, they are working from their own vision or sense of purpose. There may be a vision for the umbrella organization that public child welfare must “nest under.” Key stakeholders and partners may have visions, explicit and implicit. Legislative intent behind authorizing legislation often provides a rationale that includes critical context not to be ignored. Governors often state their visions through policies, priorities or directives on watershed events. Visions or expectations may be stated through audits, oversight committees or legislative panels and in Consent Decrees.

◆ Powerful Vision

If the public child welfare agency does not already have a compelling vision that is driving strategy and decision-making, the director must create or weave or reframe other visions into a compelling statement. The following markers provide a basis to test a vision for strength and resiliency.

A compelling vision:

- Has a story behind it: it answers why the vision matters and what it means for the organization. Leaders must be able to draw examples from their background and experience to put the vision in day-to-day terms
- Must be stated directly and simply; it should not take paragraphs to get the idea across.
- Is future oriented: it represents a stretch for the organization that may be worked in phases and over time
- Recognizes the realities of the operating environment; it is seen as in the realm of the possible
- Speaks to the heart and head; not a catchy phrase, but a statement staff members are proud to be associated with
- Evokes action, energy and robustness
- Unifies the agency; all programs, functions, systems can bridge from it or “nest under it” and link how their work supports the vision
- Holds up through crisis, iterations and changing priorities

Vignette: A director of a local human service agency found little sympathy for the struggles of vulnerable children and families within his jurisdiction. The general attitude of the county commissioners was “out of sight, out of mind.” They did not want to recognize or discuss the issue of poverty. They did, however, have a strong commitment to economic development in their community and knew that a community with homeless people did not show well to prospective businesses. The director was successful in getting their attention and an increasing share of the budget when he stopped talking about poverty and instead talked about a vision of “building strong communities.”

Examples of strong visions:

- *Every Child Deserves a Home*
- *Children and Families: Safe and Sound*
- *Strong Families: Strong Communities*

Embedding the Vision

Complex organizations have many and varied opportunities to become unfocused and lose sight of the vision. The reasons range from having too many priorities, to staff unwillingness or inability to change directions, lack of alignment of critical systems and strategies, to pressing day-to-day demands of children, youth and families and staff. Listed below are common tools for embedding the vision that can prevent loss of focus or mitigate its effects. Guidance for a number of these tools is provided in other critical areas.

- A strong executable strategic plan starts with the vision and makes it “actionable” through goals, outcomes, initiatives and work plans.
- Consistent and frequent communication, in all venues, reinforces the vision and its importance.
- Performance management systems link performance to the vision and reward investment in the vision and challenge decisions and behaviors which do not.
- Budget reflects a clear link between the vision and where money and other resources are allocated.
- Rigorous monitoring and quality improvement systems identify whether and to what extent programs intended to support the vision are, in fact, doing so and doing so to maximum effectiveness.
- Administrative functions (e.g., HR) support internal customers who in turn support children, youth and families in line with the vision

Vignette: A new director established a vision that “Every Child Deserves a Home.” The state had 28% of children in custody in residential placements at that time. The views of youth and birth families had been routinely ignored, but as part of a systemic change, their views were taken into account in family team meetings. The resulting change was a 66% reduction in the use of residential care in four years along with a doubling of the use of kinship providers. The director ensured that every county in the state had data showing the outcomes for the children in their jurisdiction. The vision was so clear and compelling that residential care providers could not convince the legislature, judiciary, or the governor to change the approach and again use residential care for a substantial number of children.

Management of Meaning and Expectation

“A leader must be a social architect who understands the organization and shapes the way it works.”² As such, the leader defines the culture of the organization and shapes the way people think, perceive, understand, feel and act. It includes the norms and values, but also the fundamental underlying beliefs and assumptions that are the basis of culture. Social architecture can be defined, assessed and shaped. Because culture is the lens through which meaning is interpreted, it is the medium through which a leader communicates a vision. A fundamental task of a leader is shaping action toward the vision for the agency’s future.

While the vision for positive outcomes for children, youth and families is the ultimate driving force of an agency, leaders may also have a vision *for* the agency’s future; that is, how she wants the agency to be perceived both by staff and stakeholder; e.g., its reputation for quality, compassionate services, and a workforce that is culturally competent. Public child welfare Directors are often hired to “fix” some facet of culture; e.g., timeliness, responsiveness.

Vignette: A mid-western state publicly called the “Calcutta of Child Welfare” by President Clinton had a culture that embodied two critical beliefs: that the best and ultimate authority

² Bennis, W. & Nanus, B. (1986). *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row

laid outside individuals so they are not expected (or rewarded) to act autonomously or on their own authority. A corollary belief was that the way one influences another person was to threaten the person with someone else's authority. The director set out to change the culture by helping staff trust their instincts and take responsibility. He directly engaged the field by going to it and becoming the personal communicator of the vision of how staff should view and act.

Assessing the Current Culture

Leaders have several lenses they can use in understanding the current culture.

◆ **Use of Power**

Leaders should examine the extent to which power is shared or centralized within the state office and particularly between the central office and the field, whether in county or state administered systems. It is also critical that they understand how their senior staff members are using the “personal power” of relationships to enhance or hinder the leader’s agenda. There is as much a social contract between parts of an agency as there is between workers and families.

Vignette: In a southern state, the central office had centralized authority and decision-making using negative anecdotes and incidents as justification to take away authority from county directors. It was estimated that state office staff spent 80% of their time in permission giving and monitoring activities, with little left over for building capacity. In parallel, caseworkers often told families what they were to change, with little input or engagement. The agency director responded by eliminating layers of review and increased the input to and review of critical decisions made in the central office.

◆ **Oral Traditions**

There are stories staff tell repeatedly about significant events even years after the occurrence. Culture may have been shaped by a tragic child fatality or a lawsuit. Difficult budget times and how leadership responded may have shaped beliefs about what is valued. What is valued and what is punished can begin to reveal key aspects of culture. The stories people tell about previous directors also reveal much about culture because they tend to memorialize actions or circumstances that had a particular meaning.

◆ **Sacred Cows**

What isn’t talked about openly is equally diagnostic. Are particular subjects off limits or pushed aside? Is the organization spending inordinate time and energy avoiding talking about difficult issues such as disproportionality? What is the reason(s) staff members are not willing to “know what they know?”

◆ **Priests and Shamans**

These are the people who have been a prior leader’s principal conveyers of meaning and responsible for embedding and maintaining a culture. Their ability to reward and punish (e.g., determine who got promoted and who did not) made them powerful keepers of the current culture. They may reflect a subculture that formed as a means of surviving the tumult of frequent leadership changes.

Embedding a New Culture

There are a number of actions a leader may take to reshape the culture. Based on the assessment of current conditions, directors may find some of the following actions more appropriate than others, some may need to be sequenced or phased in and some may need to be implemented concurrently.

◆ Setting Boundaries with Human Services Secretary

A new leader will want to have a clear social contract with the CEO that identifies when and how decisions are made; the pace of change; relationships with senior public child welfare staff; relationships with critical stakeholders; freedom to champion ideas.

Vignette: In a western state, a new Secretary appointed two deputies with whom she had long-standing relationships and another deputy, the public child welfare director, with whom she did not. As the public child welfare director began to formulate her own vision and move to put things into place, she found she was being undermined by the other two deputies who had the ear of the Secretary and were complaining about the nature and pace of her changes. This meant the public child welfare director had to back up and negotiate with the Secretary about who was to make what types of decisions with what input. Lost time and momentum were never regained.

◆ Create the New Paradigm

Creating a new paradigm requires the leader to define how they want staff to perceive themselves and be perceived by others and the role of the agency within the larger societal context. For example, should public child welfare staff be regulators of family behavior or facilitators of change? What's the role of the agency within the larger system of care? How "cutting edge" does the agency want to be? What is the reputation the agency wants to enjoy? As with the agency vision, the director may want to gather and consider input from various stakeholders about what the agency needs to "fix" and to be seen as credible in its action and respected for its work.

◆ Address Existing Executive Team

Leaders need to be clear that senior executive team members must get on board quickly and enthusiastically. They need to be involved in major decisions, including strategic planning and problem solving. They are the most critical purveyors of the culture of the agency and their investment and commitment cannot be subject to chance. For example, if the agency needs to address disparity issues taking place within the agency, members of senior management would all need to share the value that disparate treatment of children and families is undesirable before they can be conversant in and responsive to a vision of eliminating disparities.

Vignette: A public child welfare director of a western state inherited a key member of his senior team who, because of attitude and lack of critical skills, was the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong job. The person was actively slowing the pace of change and the director knew the organization was watching whether he was going to take action. There were no repercussions when the director asked the senior staff person to resign after three months because there was no longer a good job fit. Had he hesitated to act, he knew he would be reinforcing the "status quo" culture he was determined to change.

◆ Institutionalize the New Paradigm

The leader's own behavior and actions are the primary measures for embedding a new culture, i.e., walking the talk. Secondary measures, like structure, can be reinforcing, but cannot substitute.

- What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis
- How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crisis
- Observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources and rewards and status
- Deliberate role modeling, teaching and coaching
- Observed criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote and retain or dismiss organizational members
- Leaders' ability to interact with and engage a variety of constituents
- Organizational structure, systems and processes including use of data
- Organizational rites and rituals, stories, legends, and myths about events
- Formal statements of organizational philosophy

◆ Create a Bias for Action

Effective leaders have a bias toward action, an impatience for results and an unrelenting belief that organizational performance can change and outcomes for children, youth and families can be achieved. There may be setbacks, delays, false starts and mistakes, but failure is not an option. There are clear benchmarks for progress that have strong symbolic relevance to the vision.

◆ Tackle the Crisis

Directors often are hired to fix some "crisis." While the crisis may be the result of any number of other longer-term and systemic issues, the director must be able to steady the organization and steady it quickly. That is, they must be able to buy time, space and credibility needed to tackle the underlying causes.

◆ Tackle a Big Issue

It is not possible to make significant changes to a culture by refusing to acknowledge the "elephant in the room." Disparities in treatment and services for children of color provide a glaring example and reminder that children are paying a steep price for cultures that are unwilling to face and address an issue that usually requires significant change in every facet of the organization. A leader who is willing and able to help staff address underlying assumptions and biases, however, directly and materially changes the culture of an organization from one of fear to one of empowerment.

◆ Address the External Environment

The governor, legislature, courts, law enforcement, district attorneys and community providers are also critical elements in the social architecture or culture of the public child welfare system. They have considerable power to shape behavior of the agency. Judges, in particular, operate with significant statutory authority to review cases and determine appropriate action. Leaders will need to present a vision of the system, not just the agency. Some stakeholders will see it as being in their best interest and others may not. For those whose interest diverges from the public child welfare agency, the director will want to use all levers available to encourage changes, e.g., performance contracting becomes a cultural lever to address both timely permanency and a way to reward better performing providers.

◆ Address the Media

The relationship with the media deserves special attention because it can so quickly turn from an asset to a liability. The leader will be seen and quoted, accurately or not, and be the focus of efforts to assess blame. Both staff and community will be watching the words and actions closely for how the leader responds to crisis, which is a primary embedding mechanism.

Vignette: A northeastern agency had not had a child death during the current administration. A death of a child, after reuniting with his parents and a recent social work visit, sent shock waves through the state and set off speculation that the director would be fired. The leader handled the situation with compassion, integrity and transparency. The director did not avoid the media, rather using interviews to publicly take responsibility for the death. He did not assign blame other than to his office and he detailed what actions the agency took and what needed to be done. The staff and community knew the depth of feeling surrounding the case by both the family and the agency. He retained the support of the governor.

Management of Trust

Trust, as a construct, has two dimensions. The first addresses the way in which staff at all levels treat/interact with one another and, in turn, treat children, youth and families. This is the “relationship” side of trust. The second addresses the extent to which the agency and its employees are considered competent and consistent in their work, that is, can be counted on to do their jobs well and with integrity. This is referred to as the “task” side of trust. Most agency value statements are a combination of how the agency wishes to handle relationships and tasks. Common values supporting trusting relationships include respect, honesty, caring, and safety. Common values supporting “task” include integrity, competence, reliability and accountability.

Assessing the Trust Level

There are a number of markers that indicate high levels of trust in an organization. All can be behaviorally anchored, measured and observed. Several are included here as examples.

- Issues are addressed directly and proactively. There is little need for an overactive and generally inaccurate grapevine.
- Good work is noted and rewarded; staff is pleased for, not resentful of, their colleagues’ good work.
- There is a presumption of goodwill and good intentions.
- Decision-making is shared and staff is competent in the use of data and decision-making processes.
- Each level of approval adds clear and compelling value to the process.
- Employees are provided ample opportunity to contribute to problem solving and continuous improvement processes. Employees do not withhold reactions, suggestions, or ideas.
- Employees’ investment in the organization is reflected in low turnover.
- Employees evidence little fear of reprisal for speaking their minds and taking reasonable and necessary risks.
- Stewardship is high. “We versus them” attitude and turf wars are at a minimum.
- Work is focused on problem solving, not blame.
- Staff does what they say they will do.
- Micro-management is minimal.
- Employees know their jobs and value the work of others.
- Stakeholders turn to the agency for its expertise and willingness to innovate and change.
- Accountability is evident and transparent.

Embedding Trust

Several actions identified in the section on embedding a new culture are directly applicable to embedding trust in an agency. Several are referenced below. There are two additional actions, however, that are particularly useful in embedding trust. They suggest ways to minimize confusion and resulting mistrust that is generated when staff does not know where they or their organization stand.

◆ **Anchor the Vision**

Trust starts with a vision that is compelling and attainable. There must be something that is worth investing in and worth following. Having a common goal helps staff focus on the children, youth and families rather than their own personal needs and wants. Trustworthy behavior then is measured not by personal standards, but by commitment to a common purpose.

◆ **Create the Atmosphere or Culture to Have Genuine and Sometimes Uncomfortable Conversations in a Safe Environment**

Leaders do this by setting the tone and modeling this behavior for all teams of which they are a member, including high-level inter-agency teams and public-private ventures. Leaders check in with managers as to how this is going and have regular conversations about it to keep it at the forefront. Likewise, leaders establish a mechanism for hearing from the front line – possibly even through the use of an outside facilitator.

◆ **Articulate Policy Positions**

Leaders must be clear about and articulate their positions on a number of critical issues, both programmatic and administrative. They should expect that other stakeholders may hold different and/or opposing positions and be prepared to discuss their positions numerous times and in numerous settings. Positioning is the antidote to defensiveness and retreat. Knowing a leader's positions and seeing them play out consistently day-to-day frees up energy and time for problem solving and innovation that would otherwise go to second-guessing, blaming or justifying. Critical issues include, but are not limited to, the following. Guidance in this and other critical areas addresses and answers many of these.

- Nature and causes of child maltreatment
- Nature and causes of disproportionality
- Public child welfare practice including how data and research inform and modify it
- Assumptions about and treatment and/or engagement of families
- Use of authority within the agency and with families and children
- Relationship to and engagement with various stakeholders
- Use of and engagement with legal representation of the agency and the courts
- Composition of and roles and responsibilities of the Executive Team

◆ **Position the Agency**

Trust is materially affected by how the director “positions” the organization to handle events and drive change. It speaks directly to how confident and competent an organization is, i.e., the level of trust it has in its own ability to perform effectively. A leader has four options that represent a continuum of responses an organization may make. Trust is enhanced to the extent the organization is more assertive, i.e., in control of its own destiny. The positioning speaks directly to whether an agency will “manage or be managed.”

- **Reactive**
There are times when an agency faces a situation that it could not reasonably anticipate. Over time, however, the goal is to build systems and strategies for handling crises in

general. It is not necessary to know the precise nature of a crisis in order to act proactively.

- **Change the Internal Environment**

Trust is increased when the agency has strategies, systems and processes in place that are predictable, supportive and outcome focused. Staff can trust that similar situations, issues, policies will be handled in a similar manner. Strategies and processes are designed, not only to encourage, but require risk taking and challenges to the status quo. Staff is empowered to the extent possible and expected to actively engage in continuous improvement processes.

- **Change the External Environment**

More assertive leaders act upon the external environment to make change congenial to its needs. They are able to reframe issues such that external stakeholders change their perspectives and positions. They understand the politics of a situation, use data effectively, and know when the timing and circumstances are right to push for change. They maintain effective working relationships, even with opponents.

- **Establish a New Link Between the Internal and External Environment**

This position results in resetting the conditions or relationships between the internal and external environment so change is mutual and reinforcing.

- ◆ **Improve Decision-Making**

Trust is built or increased when the executive team is focused, purposeful and transparent in its deliberations, decision-making and direction. Trust does not require perfection. It does require that messages are consistent within and among programs, that commitment and investment are apparent and that staff overall feel they are in “good hands.”

- ◆ **Model Personal Behavior**

Actions always speak louder than words. Effective leaders know and should expect to be held to a higher standard. They tell the truth. When they cannot divulge information they say so and why. They know every interaction is an opportunity to teach and/or learn. They stay calm in the face of criticism and they are not idiosyncratic or arbitrary in their actions.

Management of Self

Leadership depends greatly on relationships. It is a human business. Studies conducted by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus³ find that leaders spend upwards of 90 percent of their time with others and on people problems. The social work profession has long recognized the “use of self” as an essential characteristic of the helping profession. Use of self is also a major leadership tool.

Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses

Leaders generally know early in their careers what they are good at and where their weaknesses are. Effective leaders openly acknowledge their weaknesses and allow others to compensate without undue risk. They actively seek people who will complement them, extending their competence. Listed below are some questions that effective leaders typically explore. Leaders may also want to use other recognized self-assessment instruments that provide perspectives from peers, supervisors and subordinates on their behavior.

³ Bennis, W. & Nanus, B. (1986). *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row

- Does the leader recognize and take into account that their actions may well be given meaning, both positive and negative, beyond the particular situation at hand, that is, may be given symbolic meaning? Do they make good use of symbolism and organizational stories and legends in explaining decisions and actions?
- Does the leader ask for and listen to feedback, both structured and unstructured? Are they prone to shoot the messenger?
- Does the leader comfortably and openly acknowledge gaps in her skills and knowledge and ask directly for help?
- Does the leader accept and adapt his message to the needs of his audience or does he require the audience to adapt to him?
- Does the leader adjust her approach when doing so will increase understanding and investment?
- Does the leader deal with ambiguity, ambivalence and frustration without becoming defensive or angry?
- Does the leader understand their influence, pleasure or displeasure is felt agency wide even when their direct personal influence is limited?
- Does the leader understand that even casual remarks can result in considerable loss in time, energy and goodwill and is careful, but not withholding, in his interactions?
- Does the leader practice simple courtesy?

Vignette: A state agency director traveled to meet field staff. Staff was upset over an action taken by the agency. As the conversation went on, the director became noticeably impatient and finally said, "This conversation is ended. The decision is made. I suggest you shut up and do it." While staff feared his authority they never respected his leadership. The word of the day became malicious compliance; decisions were implemented superficially and without real commitment.

Embedding New Skills and Discipline

Successful leaders work on improving their own skills and discipline as well as nurturing the skills of those around them. This requires taking chances and accepting that some failures will occur in the process of learning for both the leader and their staff. They recognize that senior executive staff is, in many ways, more visible to staff on a daily basis. And it is senior staff that will carry and translate the messages.

◆ Set Expectations

Effective leaders clearly articulate how they intend to behave and how they expect their senior staff to behave. They do not leave it to chance or to second-guessing.

- They work on, and are open about, their own continuous development.
- They do not act entitled or believe their leadership derives from having "paid one's dues."
- They understand that the "price" to stay is greater than or equal to the price to getting there.
- They regularly set higher standards for themselves and raise the bar for others as well.
- They do not minimize the reality of the work to be done changing fundamental processes while maintaining ongoing service delivery.

◆ Focus on the Executive Team

New directors most often have an executive team that is comprised of some inherited staff and some new staff they either bring with them or are able to hire. Regardless of composition, effective leaders spend considerable time "nurturing" both the individual members and the team as a whole. They want to nurture and take advantage of the different

personalities, styles and perspectives each member brings while helping the team learn to work together under new direction and new expectations. Directors can expect to face the following challenges.

- Helping members find time, energy, and enthusiasm for proposed changes when the current workload appears overwhelming
- Helping in-house staff learn how to manage former peers
- Helping staff understand the different skills and abilities needed as a day-to-day manager and as a team member and how to comfortably navigate those dual roles.
- Helping the team adjust if team members are removed from the team and as new team members replace them.

◆ **Acquiring New Skills**

There are a number of sources that provide lists of competencies needed for effective leadership, most of which are relevant and easily adaptable to public child welfare directors. APHSA developed a list of competencies specifically defined for public child welfare directors under a grant from Casey Family Programs.

There are several additional skills Warren Bennis and Burt Nanos consider critical to managing one's own behavior.

- The ability to accept people as they are, not as you would like them to be
- The capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past
- The ability to treat those close to you with the same courteous attention that you would extend to strangers and casual acquaintances
- The ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great
- The ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others
- The ability to recover after anger, fear and defensiveness
- The ability to help others grow and accept responsibility, i.e., stewards of the vision

Key Processes

Key work processes or protocols, such as those for decision-making and budget formulation, are the tools through which a public child welfare director anchors or embeds a new vision and culture in an organization. Well-designed and well-aligned processes offer staff the opportunity to commit to a new vision and demonstrate behaviorally the values undergirding an open, empowering culture. Said colloquially, it is through key processes that a leader “makes things happen.” They are the tools for developing and executing strategy, managing risk, creating investment, garnering resources, ensuring accountability and providing opportunity for growth and innovation.

We know from behavioral research that attitude follows behavior. Because this can seem intuitively backwards, leaders often keep asking for ever more fervent agreement with the stated visions and values (that is, they want the right attitude) and yet continue to be surprised when behaviors do not follow. It is only in being asked to operate in new ways and with new behaviors that staff at all levels can, in fact, demonstrate that they own the new vision and will honor the new values and culture.

Vignette: The public child welfare director of a large state agency spent significant organizational time, energy and money for training hundreds of staff on how to create a high-performance organization that focused on improved outcomes for children, youth and families and doing so with values that supported a culture that was open and participative. The difficulty came when staff returned to day-to-day activities and encountered systems and key processes that were not aligned to support the vision and new culture they now enthusiastically supported. Budget priorities were being set without input from operating entities; performance data continued to be used to punish rather than develop staff and resources (e.g., computers) were still being allocated based on personal relationships, the lack of well-aligned processes was evident to all and the unwillingness of the director to change them meant that cynicism was higher than before they started the training.

Design and Oversight

Developing and managing key processes is the primary work of middle management in large organizations. Leaders are obligated, however, to set out the criteria or standards under which key processes will be developed and to ensure that they and the organization are honoring them.

Assessing Current Key Processes

There are a series of questions that leaders can ask to determine if key processes are designed and executed such that organizational energy is focused on achieving outcomes for children, youth and families and not having to “work systems” that are difficult to understand and negotiate.

- Does the design and implementation of the process reflect the values/culture of the organization, e.g., provides good service to children, youth and families, and inclusive decision-making?
- Does the process clearly define who has what roles and responsibilities; articulates decision-making criteria; sets forth clear performance standards (e.g., turnaround time for critical reports); and provides formal feedback loops and mechanisms for continuous improvement?
- Is the process as streamlined as possible without sacrificing critical controls and supports? Are the number of people required to “sign off” limited only to those that add clear and noticeable value; e.g., review of conforming contract language?

- Was the process designed with input from both internal staff and external stakeholders who had knowledge and expertise critical to its design and/or execution? Were those most affected by a particular process actively consulted and encouraged to provide input?
- Does the process account for and mitigate “us versus them” mentality and behavior whether between central and field offices; among operating units or between staff functions and direct service providers, resulting in fewer power plays and manipulation?
- Does the process strike the appropriate balance among the roles of oversight, support, and instruction e.g., financial services oversees compliance with the budget, provides support in making needed adjustments and “teaches” managers how to track their financial position?
- Is the process well documented, with instructions, tools and templates provided for expert and non-expert users alike? For example, are there written instructions and protocols for social workers assigned to monitor non-profit service providers? Are there written guidelines for drafting budget narratives or responding to constituent complaints or media inquiries?

Leadership Process Work

Leaders are responsible to set out the broad parameters (listed above), and ensure that they and their senior team are honoring the key processes. More detailed guidance on designing and implementing key processes (e.g., workforce) is found in other critical areas. Listed below are examples of leadership work required for selected key processes.

Practice Model

Disparities in treatment and services for children of color mean that a practice model is either not well designed or is not well implemented to meet the unique needs of families. There are a number of points in a practice model where all good intentions can and do have unintended negative consequences, e.g., placement policies; limited services. Leaders are obligated to provide direction and focus, expect rigorous analysis, assume good intentions, and actively engage in problem solving.

Structure and Culture

Leaders set the organizational structure and ensure clear understanding of roles and responsibilities for each level. Stated another way, they define the nature and use of power in the organization, with whom it resides and under what conditions. They teach senior staff the line between the use and abuse of power and they take immediate and forceful action when power has been abused. They set expectations and build processes for how issues falling outside the domain of any one division are to be handled, recognizing that most critical policy and practice issues will affect two or more operating entities in the organization. They define when teams will be used and how they are constituted.

Accountability

Leaders carry ultimate accountability for the performance of the organization. Through strategic planning, they set goals and outcomes. They institute monitoring systems to track progress and set performance standards for senior staff. They are accountable for their own behavior and the effective use of their “political capital.”

Decision-making

Leaders are responsible to clarify who is responsible for which types of decisions and insist that data inform any decision-making process. They model decision-making that is intentional, focused and competent.

Key Strategic Relationships

Leaders are responsible for directly establishing and maintaining effective relationships with key stakeholders including the legislature, judiciary, CEO or governor and their staffs, critical advocacy groups and providers. They do so based on the agency's strategic plan, not a personal agenda, modeling respect for different perspectives and engaging in consensus building, as appropriate. They understand the symbolic nature of their office and "hand-off" critical relationships only when well established and when stakeholders are assured they retain access.

Crisis Management

Leaders need to be present, accounted for and visible during major crises. They need to strike the right balance between being objective, but not disengaged; between being accountable, but not blaming; between acting quickly, but not impulsively. Most important, it is during crisis that significant learning can occur about what systems, strategies and processes need to be changed or strengthened and what anticipatory work can be done to minimize, if not eliminate, them.

Learning and Innovation

Effective leaders "read to lead" and expect their senior leaders to be actively teaching and learning. Continuous improvement processes are rigorously used and new ideas are tested and evaluated. Leaders know and can explain the difference between being bold and reckless. They set conditions to minimize outsized risk, but offer encouragement and recognition for risk-taking, even if doing so does not result in the desired effect.

Operations

There are a number of markers throughout an organization that demonstrate that leadership is doing its job and doing it effectively. Some of these markers will be similar to those identified in other critical areas.

Clarity of Purpose

No gap between what leadership thinks should be done and how the front line views it. There is understanding and agreement about the major purposes and outcomes of the agency. Staff feels invested and understand how their jobs support the work of the agency.

Policy Alignment

Policies are jointly crafted, understood and followed consistently. There is minimal time spent complaining about, subverting and otherwise avoiding compliance with policies.

High Expectations

Staff is willing to report egregious work or misconduct. Staff is invested in the vision and mission of the agency and understands that children, youth and families deserve the best possible service. Reporting misconduct is not seen as “tattling,” but rather reflects the reality that achieving positive outcomes requires everyone’s best effort.

Communication Flow

Multiple open lines/channels for communication are used based on the needs of the audience and all provide formal feedback loops. Information is routinely shared. There are few “surprises” reported in the press, few topics that are not open for discussion, and minimal use of informal “grapevine.”

Safety

Staff members throughout the organization say what they mean and mean what they say. Staff does not feel hesitant to raise topics and know how to do so without anger, blaming, or hedging.

Improved Performance

Managers and supervisors do not avoid or delay evaluating staff performance. They do so from a developmental perspective, but understand the cost to the organization if they do not forcefully address negative influences and/or deficient performance.

Organizational Energy

Sick leave use and grievances are within expected limits. The organization is energized, even when the work is difficult and emotionally draining. Staff can articulate why they are there and the value of their work to the families and communities they serve.

Priorities are Clear and Manageable

Little time and energy are wasted on doing the wrong work or doing it badly. Staff is expected to “stretch,” but are not asked to do the impossible. They feel supported by supervisors and have the resources they need to do their job.



External Management is Minimal

The agency is known and respected for its competence, compassion and outcomes. The agency is not subject to intrusive and/or continual oversight by the legislature, the judiciary and advocacy groups. Its expertise is sought out and it has support in times of crisis.