Understanding the Role and Importance of Adaptive Leadership in Child Welfare Systems Change Initiatives

"Every organization is perfectly aligned to achieve the results that it gets…"

Tammy Richards, MEd, Trish Knight, MPP, David Lambert, PhD, Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine

Introduction

Several frameworks have been proposed to support child welfare agencies' in making critical changes in providing services to children and families. These include the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN), Systems of Care, and the Adaptive Leadership Framework.

What is Adaptive Leadership?

"Adaptive Challenges" can block agency improvements.

Technical Challenges	Adaptive Challenges
Problem can be solved by resources, staff, training	Problem cannot be solved by any known solution
Problem is knowable, fixable	Obscure problem, rooted in values and behavior of people in the agency

Understand the adaptive challenge
Thoroughly diagnose the problem, assess underlying values and behaviors, understand who will benefit and who will experience loss from expected changes.

Engage those whose behavior must ultimately change in diagnosing the problem and designing a solution
Create a "holding environment"; address underlying conflicts, carefully pace and support the work.

Objectives

- *Explore the use of the Adaptive Leadership Framework through a case study of New Hampshire's design and implementation of a state-wide practice model.*
- *Determine how the Adaptive Leadership Framework can be applied more broadly in the design and implementation of system change initiatives in child welfare.*

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were administered to state agency staff and to Muskie School staff charged with guiding states and providing them with the resources and expertise. The study is informed by the Muskie School's work supporting a number of states and tribes in designing and implementing organizational change efforts.

Identify Adaptive Challenge, Get on the Balcony, Uncover Cultural Norms

Problem: The Child Welfare Agency's permanency & reunification rates varied across offices.

There was an outsider perspective brought in, with a focus on implementation, allowing us to step out of our immersion in the work to think about things in a different way.

A crisis can build momentum in the agency to recognize and tackle the challenge. A meeting with local office staff with poor reunification rates brought the problem into sharp focus.
Infusion of resources can support staff in diagnostic process. Outside resources supported staff time for planning, which was critical in allowing the agency to thoroughly examine the problem.

Issue Uncovered: Offices had very different cultures, and staff had very different values; this was impacting practice, resulting in uneven outcomes for children & families.

We knew we wanted consistent practice--if you can't see it in the records, if the field doesn't know what it is, if it isn't in the practice, then we don't have a practice model.

Trusted outside partners help agencies observe the broader context and point out existing patterns. Consultants asked probing questions supporting the agency in uncovering issues.

Peer connections help the organization step outside itself. A former child welfare director who tackled a similar challenge was brought to the table.

Adaptive Challenge: How can we create a culture which values family engagement, changes our practice, and improves outcomes for children and families?

Supporting a design solution that would change cultural norms would be critical.

"Give the Work Back to the People", Create Holding Environment, Pace the Work

Design of the practice model was informed by the nature of the Adaptive Challenge.

A 30 month timeframe for design and implementation built momentum.
- A shortened timeframe can increase the urgency, but must be balanced with adequate resources; staff time is essential.

As I'm doing training, staff are saying "I know this, I developed this". The practice model is not something scary, or coming top down - it's familiar.

The practice model was designed by a team consisting primarily of Field Staff and the Child Welfare Director.
- Involvement of the field in designing practice changes shifted the culture to support what was designed.
- Purposeful selection of field staff:
  - Geographic representation
  - Included "skeptics" who raise issues that others avoid

Field Staff involvement was critical – so was Executive Leadership involvement.

I (the Director) sat in every one of our design team meetings. I had to agree that their voices were equal to mine...we brought in the naysayers, and those that were going to sell it. It was tough, but it worked.

- Continuing presence of the Executive Leadership showed true investment in change and gave authority to Design Team
- Modeled and encouraged honest discussion

The agency hired a birth parent and a youth consultant to provide input to the design of the practice model.

Hiring a youth and a parent who have the same level of input and involvement as staff was a critical piece… their true involvement in strategic decisions is needed.

- Gave valuable feedback to the agency on practice changes
- Modeled the desired practice shifts around increasing family engagement

Findings

Inconsistent practice was an Adaptive Problem; training alone would not have solved it.
- Trusted consultants supported agency in diagnosing the adaptive challenge and crafting a design structure.
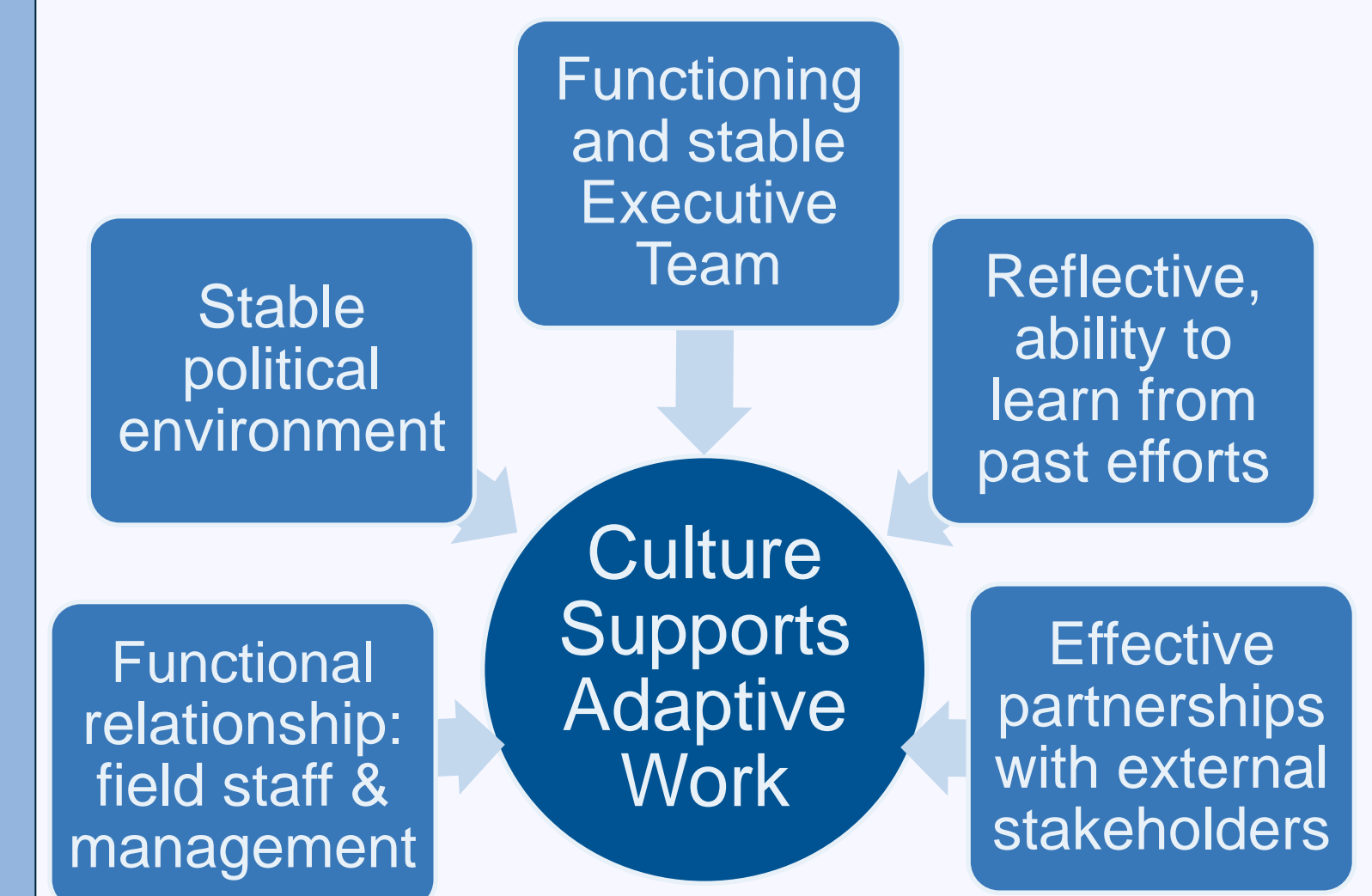
"Giving the work back to the people" supports shifts in agency culture.
- Engaging the field does not mean executive leadership can abdicate responsibility for support and resources.
- Engagement is not the end goal, it is in service to changing practices and outcomes for children and families.

The framework is useful in understanding complex problems and shaping design strategies.
- Approach makes explicit what some organizations do implicitly; child welfare agencies are attuned to the political landscape, adaptive work shifts the focus to the internal agency system
- Supports nuanced design of solutions
- Builds leadership capacity throughout the organization

The Agency's Culture Supported Adaptive Work

Functioning and stable Executive Team

Stable political environment

Reflective, ability to learn from past efforts

Culture Supports Adaptive Work

Functional relationship: field staff & management

Effective partnerships with external stakeholders

Adaptive Challenges are more difficult to confront when an agency's culture and context make it less able to create a "holding environment" where conflicts can be unearthed, and honest discussions can take place.