

Creating Change and Keeping it Real: How excellent child-serving organizations carry out their goals

Cross-Site Findings for Phase I of Community Based Theories of Change

A five-year study of the Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health
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Introduction

The question of how human service organizations translate their ideas into action is an important one. For human services in general and children's services in particular, little is known about how service-related policy is conceptualized and operationalized at the local level and how this translates to actual service delivery. For example, what structures and processes within a human service organization support a shared commitment to its mission and goals? How does an organization consistently communicate its purpose and philosophy to those responsible for carrying out its mission and goals? How does an organization sustain its focus in the face of complexity and change in its environment? Research suggests that because organizational decisions are made under complex conditions, it is important to study the processes that contribute to these decisions (Rogers, 1995).

Community-Based Theories of Change is a national study funded by the federal Center for Mental Health Services and National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research that is designed to address questions such as those mentioned above. The study investigates:

- How community-based systems and programs conceptualize, operationalize, and implement service delivery for a particular population of children and families;
- How they evaluate the results of this service delivery;
- And how local service policies are integrated and transferred into daily operations.

From August 2000 through January 2002, three sites participated in Phase I of this five-year study. The purpose of *Community-Based Theories of Change* is to better understand organizational processes that support local policy implementation. The study investigates how organizations communicate and

Community-Based Theories of Change investigates how human service organizations carry out their mission and goals, how they transfer their policy agendas across stakeholders, and how they sustain their service strategies over time.

sustain their purpose and guiding principles among the people responsible for carrying out the organizational mission. The central question of this study is: How do human service organizations successfully implement their policies at the local level? Phrased differently, the study investigates how human service organizations turn their ideas into action.

Community-Based Theories of Change is grounded in the assumption that a clearly articulated, widely held theory of change facilitates local policy implementation.

A theory of change can be understood as the underlying assumptions that guide a service delivery strategy and are believed to be critical to producing change and improvement for children and families (as discussed in Hernandez & Hodges, 2001). *Community-Based Theories of Change* is grounded in the assumption that a clearly articulated, widely held theory of change facilitates local policy implementation. It is further assumed that a participating site's 'theory of change' reflects the organization's mission and goals and represents the implementation of policy by the organization.

Phase I of this study sought to identify organizational structures and processes that support policy implementation across three participating sites. Each site operated under a well articulated, widely held theory of change, although the theories of change were different at each site.

This report will summarize the cross-site findings of *Community-Based Theories of Change* and present lessons learned across the three participating sites. An overview of the research questions for this study can be found in Appendix A. Study descriptive materials that were distributed to potential and participating sites are included in Appendix B.

Methods

Site Selection

Six sites were initially identified as potential participants in Phase I; three sites met the selection criteria and agreed to participate. The participating sites were: the Blended Funding Project (King County, Washington); United Way of Central Ohio (Ohio); and Washington County Child Mental Health (Vermont).

The goal of the site selection process was to establish that participating sites anchored their activities in a clearly articulated and widely held theory of change. Site selection began with telephone interviews of key informants and a detailed document review. This was followed by visits to each potential site that involved: a) direct observation of decision making about administrative or service delivery issues, and b) key informant interviews to determine the site's theory of change from the perspectives of participants. Results of the site selection visits were summarized using a logic model format that included a concise statement of the identified theory of change as well as data related to the conceptualization, operationalization, and implementation of their theory. In addition, the framework included site observations related to the project's history, financial structure, evaluation, and population of focus. Sites were given the opportunity to provide feedback and correction to their theory of change logic model.

The site selection process confirmed that each of the participating sites demonstrated the ability to clearly articulate and communicate local service delivery policies to their staff and other stakeholders. Sites also demonstrated their ability to report the results of service delivery to local stakeholders in a predictable and timely manner. In addition, they demonstrated a clear set of observable managerial processes for

Site selection criteria for Phase I of this study included that participating sites have the demonstrated ability to clearly articulate and communicate their local service delivery policies to their staff and other stakeholders.

eliciting the involvement of service delivery implementers from various levels of a site's organizational structure.

Identified Theories of Change

Having a theory of change should be distinguished from members of an organization having a shared purpose or sharing a deep concern related to an issue, such as reducing out of home placements or increasing community-based services and supports for children with serious emotional disturbance. Having a theory of change requires an idea or theory for how to affect change related to a shared purpose, goal, or concern. The idea must focus on how an organization will bring about change related to a purpose, cause or specific population. The emphasis of change must be specific to a population and must articulate intended action and the expected result.

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Using a theory-based approach, organizational members are compelled to examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions they use to link expected outcomes to strategies for achieving those outcomes. This causes them to focus on why they believe certain services or policies will lead to positive changes in the identified population.

A brief description of the participating sites and their identified theories of change follow:

Blended Funding Project:

The Blended Funding Project of King County, Washington, was created as a new and collaborative approach to serving children with emotional disturbance and their families. Blended Funding combines funds from three participating children's service systems (i.e., child welfare, mental health, and special education) into a single resource pool. Parent-led child and family teams have access to these funds

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to provide mental health, educational, recreational, social and other supports to meet child and family needs. The project recognizes that the family is usually the child's most valuable resource and the project's theory of change hinges on families being sufficiently empowered to take advantage of the opportunities offered through the Blended Funding Project.

The Blended Funding theory of change is "With the support of the child and family team and with the ability to purchase and create needed supports...families will become empowered; everyone- the child, family, care manager, community team and service systems- will become more hopeful and motivated to change; service systems and families will collaborate more effectively on behalf of children; children's connections to natural communities (family, school, neighborhood) will strengthen; the family will be better able to care for the child's needs; children's needs will be met across multiple domains; and children's behavior and functional status will improve" (Williams, Vander Stoep, & Jones, 1998).

United Way of Central Ohio:

The United Way of Central Ohio, an established community agency, undertook planful and targeted organizational change intended to redefine the agency as a community impact organization rather than a fundraising and allocation organization. Through community needs assessment, seven areas of focus were identified: education, employment, health, housing, neighborhood development, race relations, and safety. Community impact goals were identified for each of these focus areas, and Vision Councils (staffed largely by volunteers) were created to identify and fund programs specifically intended to achieve the community impact goals. Vision Council volunteers described the Vision Council structure as shifting the focus of United Way away from being a

fundraising vehicle to becoming a partner in the community. Fundamentally, this change represented a shift away from the traditional view of the funded agency as customer to a ‘donor as customer’ approach.

The United Way theory of change is “Focusing efforts on targeted community initiatives will allow United Way to improve critical community conditions” (United Way Site Selection Summary, 2000).

Washington County Child Mental Health:

Washington County Child Mental Health is part of the Vermont System of Care, a service delivery and system change model for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families that was codified into state law in 1988. Strategies for developing and sustaining the Vermont System of Care include blended funding, local decision-making, family involvement, and a wraparound model of service delivery. In Washington County, a collaboration between Washington County Mental Health and the Division of Social and Rehabilitative Services provides services to children with serious emotional disturbance and their families through the Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground Program.

The Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground theory of change is “The development of a comprehensive and coordinated system of care that provides individualized and strength-based local services and supports will reduce the need for out-of-home placement and prevent children from entering into out-of-home care” (Vermont System of Care Site Selection Summary, 2001).

Data collection included three methods: ongoing document review, key informant interviews, and concept mapping.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for the three participating sites included three methods: ongoing document review, key informant interviews, and concept mapping.

Document Review

Document review was used to collect data on the recorded theory of change and to better understand the results of having a theory of change. The review of documents typically included published literature, promotional materials, evaluation reports, and annual reports as well as forms and other documents that verified organizational processes. Key investigators, including the co-principal investigators and the project manager, completed the document review.

Key Informant Interviews

Individual interviews with managers and administrators, system or program staff, and service recipients were used to provide more detail about the recorded theory of change, and all interview data were used to better understand the results of having a theory of change. The interviews were scheduled in advance and conducted by trained staff from the Department of Child and Family Studies at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida. On average, interviews lasted 45 minutes. Interviewers summarized the answers to each question in writing and these answers were combined across respondents into a composite. Notebooks were prepared so that all respondent answers to a single interview question could be viewed together for comparison.

Thirteen people were interviewed as part of the Blended Funding Project, including 5 administrator/managers, 4 direct service providers,

Individual interviews with managers and administrators, system or program staff, and service recipients were used to provide more detail about the recorded theory of change . . .

and 4 family members. In Ohio, 13 people were interviewed including 5 staff of United Way, 4 Vision Council volunteers, and 4 providers funded by United Way. For the Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground Program in Washington County, Vermont, 17 people were interviewed including 4 managers and administrators, 6 direct service providers, and 7 family members.

A team of five staff read the interview composites independently, coded the data according to the eight research questions, and completed interview data analysis. Following their independent analyses, team members met to discuss the data and identify emergent themes. A matrix was developed that allowed the analysis team to consider these themes as they related to a specific research question. The matrix also prompted the team to identify specific passages in the interview data that either supported or refuted each theme under discussion. Special care was taken to consider each potential theme across respondent type so that differences in perception on the part of administrator/managers, direct service, and family member respondents were reflected.

Concept mapping is a process that allows a group of stakeholders to express their ideas on a certain topic and then look at all of these ideas as they relate to one another.

Concept Mapping

Concept mapping, using Concept System software (Concept Systems, Inc.) was used to collect and analyze data related to the structures and processes within each of the sites that support how its mission and goals are carried out. Concept mapping is a process that allows a group of stakeholders to express their ideas on a certain topic and then look at all of these ideas as they relate to one another. The result of this process is a visual map that illustrates:

- The group's ideas
- How the ideas are related to one another
- How the ideas can be organized or clustered into general concepts

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- How concepts are rated by the group in terms of importance and effectiveness.

The sampling strategy for the concept mapping process was to involve individuals who were responsible for carrying out the mission and goals of the organization. There were 12 participants in the concept mapping process for Blended Funding, 9 participants from United Way of Central Ohio and 13 participants from Washington County's Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground program. All concept mapping participants were familiar with the services provided by the participating sites and with the theory of change used by these sites.

Concept mapping begins with a structured brainstorming process in which participants are given a focus statement and guided to generate statements in response to the prompt. The focus statement was consistent for each of the sites:

“Generate a list of things that are done [in your organization] so that you and others understand how to carry out its mission and goals.”

Following the brainstorming, participants at each site were provided with a complete set of the statements and asked to sort the statements into piles in a “way that makes sense” to them. After the individuals created their piles of statements, they labeled each pile according to the type of statements included in that pile. In addition to sorting the statements, each participant was given a list of all statements and asked to rate their importance on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not important and 5 being very important. Finally, participants rated the same statements as to their effectiveness.

The Concept System software makes use of multivariate statistical techniques for the analysis of data, including multidimensional scaling and cluster

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analysis. This analysis was used to create a conceptual map for each sites based on the perspectives of the participants. On these maps, statements perceived to be similar to one another by the group are positioned close to each other and statements perceived to be dissimilar are located farther apart. Similar statements are grouped together in non-overlapping categories called clusters based on their special proximity to one another.

Individual concept mapping results have been made available to each participating site.

Cross-Site Findings

Data from document reviews, key informant interviews, and concept mapping were analyzed for the purpose of identifying emergent themes common across the sites. The themes identified as common across the participating sites included:

- Four characteristics that shape the nature of these organizations as they carry out their missions and goals.
- Two organizational facilitators.
- Three elements that sustain the theory of change consistently and over time.
- Benefits and challenges identified with having a clearly articulated and widely held theory of change.

Four organizational characteristics: Identity, Integration, Initiative, and Innovation.

Organizational Characteristics

Four characteristics emerged from the data that were common across the sites and seemed to significantly shape the nature and complexion of these organizations as they worked to carry out their mission and goals. These were: Identity, Integration, Initiative, and Innovation. Each of these

characteristics is presented below along with specific examples from the sites.

Identity: The participating sites shared the characteristic of having a strong organizational identity. Stakeholders within and outside of these organizations had a clear and shared understanding of organization’s purpose, what the organization intends to accomplish and why. Interview respondents indicated the organizations are anchored in vision, mission, and values. Concept mapping data also indicate strong anchoring across sites in organizational vision and mission as well as values and principles.

Organizational identity was sometimes expressed as having a clear organizational focus. A funded provider at United Way commented, “The United Way is faced with the same issues all of us are in our daily lives or organizational lives, and that is, there are too many demands for the resources- time, talent and treasure available. And if you’re really gonna move the needle and show progress you have to focus. And that I believe is the major objective of Vision Councils is to be able to focus on specific needs.”

“ . . . if you’re really gonna move the needle and show progress, you have to focus.”

United Way

An administrator for Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground in Vermont discussed the importance of having a clear philosophy to fall back on, particularly given the challenges of reducing out-of-home placement and meeting individual needs, “We can always go back to the philosophy when [we’re] not clear”. Similarly, another Vermont respondent commented that having a strong organizational identity provides reinforcement for “what we’re all about.”

A direct service provider with the Blended Funding Project commented on the importance of having a clear organizational vision, even when an organization struggles for consistency, “I totally believe in the vision that Blended Funding has laid forward. I know

they've struggled in figuring out what to do and how to do it. They're now discovering strengths that families bring to the table and how important it is to have that joint partnership.”

Integration: Organizations participating in Phase I exhibited characteristics of organizational integration. That is, their structures and functions were well aligned and individual roles within the organizations were clear and well supported. Structure and function worked together to support the achievement of the organizational mission and goals.

The alignment of structure and function ensures that the intended mission can be carried out without structural or functional impediments to the process. Such alignment prevents situations in which dedicated workers function to fulfill the mission of the organization while facing structural barriers such as eligibility criteria or funding restrictions that prevent services being delivered as intended. Alignment of structure and function also restricts the ability of staff to function independently in individualized efforts to carry out goals regardless of the agreed-upon organizational goals and strategies.

The alignment of structure and function ensures that the intended mission can be carried out without impediments to the process.

A volunteer with United Way indicated that the theory of change provides direction that allows more focus on meeting identified community need and less focus on allocation of resources. The respondent described the funding decisions made as part of his Vision Council responsibilities as “more integrated” and “broader.” This respondent commented that the focus now is on identifying and funding “the kind of programs that will support [a specific] set of objectives” rather than simply allocating a certain dollar amount of funds.

Examples of structural and functional alignment cited by interview participants across sites include items such as the availability of written program guidelines

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for new and existing staff as well as regularly held staff meetings in which management and service delivery issues are discussed. In addition, the convenient physical location of meeting space as well as the co-location or convenient location of collaborating staff from partner agencies contributed to alignment.

Role clarity adds to organizational integration of structure and function in that staff members clearly understand how their responsibilities relate to those of others in the organization and to achieving the goals of the entire organization. A Vermont respondent indicated that role clarity supports consensus around what organizational roles should be, “I think it’s important for roles to be defined. So that everybody knows . . . this is what I’m gonna be doing, this is what you’re gonna be doing, [and] we both agree on that, and if anybody steps out of role, it’s by agreement.”

Initiative: Participating sites also demonstrated organizational initiative, meaning they were achievement oriented and believed themselves to be accountable for the results of their strategies and actions both inside and outside of the organization.

Staff, volunteers and funded providers with United Way talked about the organization’s achievement orientation and willingness to take initiative by bringing critical issues before the community. The organization’s goal was to take a leadership role solving community problems and to be accountable to the community for the results of these efforts. A United Way volunteer commented, “The United Way is good at evaluating their own processes, as well as critiquing [them] openly... there is an ongoing seeking-out of improvement.”

Achievement in the Blended Funding Project was defined through their ability to empower families and achieve the results laid out in their model of change.

“I think it’s important for roles to be defined so that everybody knows. . . this is what I’m gonna be doing, this is what you’re gonna be doing, [and] we both agree on that . . .”

Washington County, Vermont

Family members in the Blended Funding Project cited the individualized and participatory approach to evaluation as an important measure of the project's achievements and of its accountability to the families being served. One family member said, "I never would have had a broad picture of what a child looks like as a typical teenager if I didn't have the research information. It gave me a broader scope and helped me know what we were going toward." In addition, a Blended Funding administrator suggested that the evaluation demonstrates the achievements of the project when he commented, "Clearly our evaluations show that families are becoming empowered, that systems are collaborating, that children are getting benefits... in terms of functionality, but more importantly in terms of successful relationships with the community that facilitate their growth and health."

"I never would have had a broad picture of what a child looks like as a typical teenager if I didn't have the research information."

Blended Funding Project

Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground data indicate that this program defines its achievement through its ability to meet challenges. The comments of a direct service provider in Vermont describe the achievement orientation for that organization, "I think the best thing about the Higher Ground Program is that we really don't accept failure. If we're given a challenge, we are always looking for a way to work with that challenge."

Innovation: Phase I sites also share the organizational characteristic of innovation, meaning the organizations are willing to challenge established convention by taking new and creative approaches to service delivery. These innovative strategies represent calculated and well-considered risks rather than impulsive decisions. And innovative approaches are always measured against their ability to achieve the organizational mission while maintaining an organizational flexibility to allow for adaptation and change in strategy. Participants at each of the sites

expressed a certain pride in their organization's ability to be innovative.

A funded provider with United Way identified the organization's efforts to encourage new providers to participate in their funding process as a significant innovation, "A major change has been in the openness of the system to encourage new providers. Before we were locked into traditional providers, now a bigger proportion of money is set aside for new programs (not necessarily new agencies). There is an intentionality to increase the proportion of funds for new programs."

Family members with Blended Funding described the project's flexible approach to family team planning meetings as an important innovation in their community. One family member commented, "[The team approach] allows you to have more flexibility and more services to meet your child's needs because you're not limited." Another family member discussing the Family Team process said, "From month to month we're constantly trying to come up with different solutions . . ."

Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground, which is an established interagency collaboration, defined innovation as their ability to keep their collaborative efforts fresh and well-functioning. An administrator in Vermont talked about the importance of keeping the program vital, saying, "We have to educate new people into it and there's this ever-present need . . . to keep it fresh, keep it working, keep the relationships good, keep the program a living and vital program."

Two Organizational
Facilitators: Leadership,
Communication.

Organizational Facilitators

The cross-site data suggest that two facilitators support the organizational characteristics of identity, integration, initiative, and innovation. These

facilitators are: leadership and communication. These facilitators enhance the impact of the organizational characteristics by reducing any obstacles to their accomplishment. Without these facilitators, the influence of strong organizational identity, integration, initiative, and innovation would be impeded.

Leadership was also identified as crucial to the sites' ability to achieve their mission and goals. Across the sites, leadership provided inspiration, guidance, and direction. The leadership style observed across the sites can be characterized as both strong and empowering. Participants at each site were clear about lines of authority and the established decision hierarchy. However, across the sites, authority for decision-making was decentralized within clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Stakeholders at all levels (including staff, volunteers, and family members at some sites) were empowered to problem solve and make decisions within their areas of responsibility. In this way, leaders inspired and guided organizational activities without maintaining absolute control.

Communication served the purpose of transmitting information and ideas within and outside of the participating sites. Across the sites, communication can be characterized as open, multi-directional, and continuous. In addition to formal methods of communication such as regular staff meetings, written reports, and training events, the cross-site data indicate that informal lines of communication are also strong. These include easy access to co-workers and other stakeholders by means of impromptu phone calls, office visits, and lunch gatherings in which concerns and issues related to policy implementation are discussed as needed. Ease of communication was identified through interview and concept mapping data as a crucial factor in the sites' ability to carry out their intended mission and goals.

Stakeholders at all levels (including staff, volunteers, and family members at some sites) were empowered to problem solve and make decisions within their areas of responsibility.

Sustaining the Theory of Change

In addition to characteristics and facilitators, three elements were identified across the sites that affect their ability to sustain their theory of change with consistency and over time.

These elements can be summarized as follows:

The first element is organizational commitment to the theory of change through adequate and consistent support. Cross-site data indicate that theories of change were well supported and frequently reinforced within and outside of the participating organizations. Adequate resources were provided for training and as were descriptive or promotional materials that clearly stated the theory of change and what it intended to accomplish. This ranged from family empowerment training in the Blended Funding Project to recorded telephone messages used to describe the purpose and goals of the United Way Vision Council structure when incoming callers are put on hold.. Consistent reinforcement of the theory of change included the theory as well as values and principles being prominently hung on meeting room and office walls and in formal and informal meetings in which the theory was clearly restated.

1st Element:
Commit to the theory of
change.

Without adequate and consistent organizational support of the theory of change, multiple theories may be implemented simultaneously as stakeholders within and outside of the organization adapt and refine their activities in ways that are not consistent with the theory.

The second element is that organizations must have a way to know if the strategies that are actually implemented are the same strategies that are in the theory of change. Information about implementation

2nd Element:
Know if implementation is consistent with the theory.

can be gathered informally or through a formal evaluation process. Regardless of the information source, however, it is important that an organization is able to:

- Confirm that their strategies are in fact serving whom they intended to serve;
- Confirm that they are providing the services and supports they intended to provide.

Without information confirming that implementation strategies are consistent with the theory of change, any information about the results of the program cannot be attributed to the impact of the program strategies.

The third element is that the organization must have a way to know if their strategies are producing the desired impact. To accomplish this, evaluation and other information sources can be used to determine if the results of service delivery are what were expected from implementation of the theory of change. Information about the impact or results of their strategies can help determine if there are unexpected challenges to implementation and sustainability.

3rd Element:
Know if theory-based strategies are producing their desired impact.

Without information regarding the results of service delivery, organizations cannot determine if their theory of change for children and families continues to make sense under current conditions.

Each of the sites demonstrated a strong reliance on information for guiding decisions related to implementation of strategies and the achievement of organizational mission and goals. All three sites demonstrated a strong reliance on informal sources of information. In addition, both Blended Funding and United Way relied on ongoing formal evaluation efforts as an important source of information about whether they were implementing intended strategies and if these strategies were producing the expected impact. Although there is no ongoing evaluation of

Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground, this organization has been part of more than a dozen evaluation efforts during the past decade.

Benefits and Challenges

Interview participants were asked to identify both benefits and challenges that they associate with using a theory of change approach to policy implementation. Across sites, several themes emerged related to these benefits. Challenges and limitations presented by using a theory of change approach were also identified. These are discussed below.

Benefits

Four benefits to having a theory of change were identified across the participating sites.

Focused Effort: Participating sites report that having a theory of change is linked to being better able to target or focus services in order to produce desired outcomes. For example, respondents in Vermont emphasized the importance of having a philosophy that can focus efforts, guide decisions about services and be linked to positive outcomes, “. . . it’s important that the folks who are closest to the work continually have [the theory of change] to go back to and continue to have that as a set of guiding principles, as a set of goals . . .” United Way participants emphasized the benefits of being able to focus on issues that have been identified by the community as concerns and being able to say no to things that do not fit the overall goals. And Blended Funding emphasized the ability to focus on efforts that will be most beneficial to their target population, children and families, with one respondent saying, “I think we are seeing quite a few benefits, and I think the theory of change helped us direct our work to those issues we felt were going to be most important

Theory of Change Benefits:

- Focused effort
- Expanded creativity
- Improved ability to demonstrate effectiveness
- Increased engagement

and beneficial to children and their families in terms of improving their life situation. If we hadn't approached, or come up with, a theory of change, we might have done the same kind of scatter-shot work that we tend to do in the child-serving system when we don't collaborate and come up with a common vision about what we're trying to accomplish."

"Families don't always fit into this nice little system we have, so we try to be creative . . ."

Blended Funding Project

Expanded Creativity: All sites described the ability to be creative and flexible in designing and providing services. Although not directly attributed to having a theory of change, in each example the theory of change provided a philosophical and strategic base that supported creativity and flexibility for the site. In the Blended Funding Project, the theory of change supports the idea of choice and options for families. A family member commented, "The mental health team from before gave no options; they weren't there; they weren't available. With Blended Funding, there was a lot more to choose from, more variety and freedom in what kind of stuff we needed. We got more appropriate help." Another family member commented, "Families don't always fit into this nice little system we have, so we [Blended Funding] try to be creative and kinda mold services for families instead of expecting the families to mold to us."

In Vermont, creativity is linked to development of services to meet needs rather than fitting needs into existing services. "The fact that each plan is individualized really looks at a particular child. There's no formula." And at United Way, creativity is promoted through the flexible development of proposals for funding and the development of goals within Vision Councils that tie to the overall community objectives. Central Ohio United Way gives agencies freedom to propose strategies, but they must be based on a logic model format that links them to overall objectives for the community and a proposed budget. A United Way funded provider commented, ". . . There's quite a bit of flexibility. . .

We can name our own criteria, own objective measurements, but have to make sure we are meeting them the way we stated them and are still targeted on the original goal...They will say, 'You tell us how you're going to meet this goal, and if it's reasonable and you've got all the pieces together the way you see them, then we can go for that.' ”

Improved Ability to Demonstrate Effectiveness:

Having articulated a theory of change gives stakeholders a means by which to judge the effectiveness of the organization's efforts by linking identified needs to services and outcomes. In the Blended Funding Project, outcomes identified across all respondents were directly related to stated goals in the theory of change. These included families becoming empowered, child-serving agencies collaborating, and children benefiting in terms of functionality as well as developing successful relationships with their community. Vermont links effectiveness to their ability to work collaboratively to reach the desired outcome of reduced out-of-home placement. "... if kids have to be placed out of their homes, that they're placed in Washington County as opposed to be placed anywhere else in the state. We have data that supports that." United Way respondents link effectiveness to having a clear message that supports the ultimate goal of increasing donations and having an impact on the community. A respondent commented, "We do annually what we call a Caring Report that looks at community conditions, and generally peruse the data, and survey several hundred residents. That gives us a snapshot or perception of how we're doing."

Sites report that the involvement of stakeholders and the quality of their involvement can be improved by having a theory of change.

Increased Engagement: Sites report that the involvement of stakeholders and the quality of their involvement can be improved by having a theory of change because people understand the desired outcome of the effort and their role in it. United Way interview responses suggest that having a clear theory

of change has increased commitment to the United Way mission. United Way has seen a growth in its donor base as well as increased ability to attract knowledgeable volunteers and agency proposals targeted to the mission. A United Way staff member commented, “I think the most important piece of it is the fact that we are focusing on initiatives that the community has spoken about versus those that we’ve developed ourselves . . . In working on community issues we are working with and in conjunction with the community.” Respondents with Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground believe that increased engagement of stakeholders is a result of having shared goals, values and philosophy. A direct service worker commented, “I think the most helpful thing is that the team members are all communicating and that we all understand what the goals are.” And a Blended Funding family member commented, “The people involved are more involved, they know it’s not just business as usual. There are certain things they have to do to be part of it, so they’re just more involved.”

Challenges

Four challenges were identified as associated with having a theory of change.

Resistance to Change: Although the theories of change varied across participating sites, each organization was invested in creating change through its implementation of policy. Participating sites reported that using a theory of change approach can produce resistance to change at both the individual and organizational levels. In the Blended Funding Project, achieving family empowerment was understood to mean that families would be involved at all levels of the program. A Blended Funding administrator discussed their theory of family empowerment and the resistance to involving families, “When we formed the Blended Funding

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Project . . . we wanted families to be represented at all levels of the organization. Some of our traditional partners felt there was some conflict of interest, that you couldn't have families on the [interagency] steering committee.”

United Way respondents discussed the tension and resistance created by their new priority for funding programs that are specifically designed to have impact in defined community need areas. The theory of change represented a significant shift in the United Way funding process. The new approach emphasizes funding programs that target their programs to meet identified community needs and uses the Vision Council structure to make these funding decisions. A funded provider commented, “I believe that the role and the place of an agency has been minimized, whereas agencies were more powerful, more important in the past, they are subordinate to the Vision Council and the United Way brand marketing.” Commenting on resistance to the more targeted funding strategy, an administrator said, “There are still people who want [United Way] to be all things to all people . . . I think, slowly, we're understanding that's not possible.”

Turnover: Staff turnover was identified as a challenge to implementing a theory of change because turnover affects how widely the theory is accepted and shared. A Blended Funding administrator commented, “We've had leadership changes at the county level in foster care and mental health, and every time that has happened we've had to go back in and completely re-explain how we're blending money.” Turnover in the care management staff has also affected Blended Funding. A family member observed that her new care manager was “doing the opposite of how the Blended Funding Project was started” by making foster placement decisions without team input. Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground has worked to reduce similar problems with staff

Theory of Change Challenges:

- Resistance to change
- Turnover
- Balancing the real and the ideal
- Need for capacity building

“We’ve had leadership changes . . . and every time that has happened we’ve had to go back and completely re-explain why we are blending money.”

Blended Funding Project

turnover through an emphasis on teamwork and constant communication. One staff member commented that communication with team members builds understanding of the goals and helps people work toward similar goals.

Balancing the Real and the Ideal: Participating sites report that the theory of change must be responsive to the realities of implementation, including budget, community, and child safety needs. Without this, sustainability is an issue. Blended Funding respondents reported that, initially, their theory of change called for replacing formal supports with informal supports. They found that families benefited from increases in both formal and informal support because they found that children with serious emotional disturbance have ongoing and complex needs and their necessity of formal supports is not necessarily reduced by an increase in informal support. Respondents from Systems in Collaboration-Higher Ground found that their theory had to be based in the reality of practice in order to be effective. They found that holding people to a theory of change should be linked to reality. A Vermont administrator said, “Frequently we come up with constructs and they sound all sweetness and light . . . this work is extremely difficult, it’s trying, it can wear people down, and if you don’t have a basic set of values to fall back on that remind you why you’re here, it’s not going to work.” United Way respondents indicated that viewing their theory of change as a developmental process rather than a static one has helped make their commitment to community impact reality rather than theory. One United Way funded provider indicated that the Vision Council structure has been criticized as too categorical to accommodate groups with a more comprehensive, widespread mission, commenting, “We are still struggling with this, but I think [we’re moving in] a positive direction. The United Way does try to be receptive to reality and they’re not afraid to hang onto

what’s good and move forward to some areas that seem more appropriate.”

Need for Capacity Building: Sites also found that the capacity of their service systems needed to be improved in order to better implement their theories of change. For example, the ability to provide individualized care is limited if there is inadequate service capacity. The best intentions of system collaboration cannot be realized if access to services is restricted by the availability of a broad range of services and supports. A Vermont family member talked about the need to expand the capacity of the system to provide services in order to better carry out the theory of change. Similarly, Blended Funding respondents identified the importance of expanding capacity for services such as treatment foster care in order to better meet the needs of children and families.

Sometimes it is important to build capacity in areas other than direct services.

Sometimes it is important to build capacity in areas other than direct services. A Blended Funding service provider noted an increased capacity in accounting procedures was necessary in order to support the project, “The biggest challenge we have is meeting accounting needs . . . we need to develop this process so that money to support families is not hung up for weeks on end.” United Way data suggest the need to build the capacity of all stakeholders to implement the theory rather than just understand it. Acknowledging that volunteer staff can understand and even articulate the theory of change, a United Way administrator discussed the need for training that would better prepare them to implement the theory of change in their work.

Discussion

The cross-site findings provide insight into the planning and management processes of human service organizations that have a clearly articulated and widely held theory of change. A useful concept emerging

A useful concept arising from this analysis is the existence of a balance between regulative and generative organizational processes in human service organizations.

from this analysis is the existence of a balance between regulative and generative organizational processes in human service organizations. Drawing from Uzzell's (1990) description of regulative and generative organizations, regulative processes can be identified as those which rely on power for decision making authority, employ standardization of work practices, filter out information that would provide feedback, and treat actions as final rather than conditional. In contrast, generative processes can be identified as those which rely on information for decision making authority, allow for idiosyncratic or contextual design, incorporate information that will provide feedback, and treat actions as experimental and open to adaptation when necessary.

An example of an organization that we would expect to be highly generative is a street vendor whose products, prices, and location are open to change and adaptation depending upon the relative success of current strategies. Customers appreciate a generative approach in circumstances such as these because they benefit from a vendor who can adapt quickly to the changing the needs and expectations of customers.

In contrast, an example of an organization customers hope will be highly regulative is a nuclear power plant. In this case, an authoritative structure, standardization of practice and careful monitoring of critical indicators ensure public safety as well as a reliable power source. Customers welcome adherence to the regulatory aspects of planning and management that are in place in a nuclear power plant.

Balancing Regulative and Generative Functions

Although these examples illustrate the extremes of generative and regulative planning and management, most organizations must develop processes that fall somewhere between the extremes. These processes must allow for organizational responsiveness built

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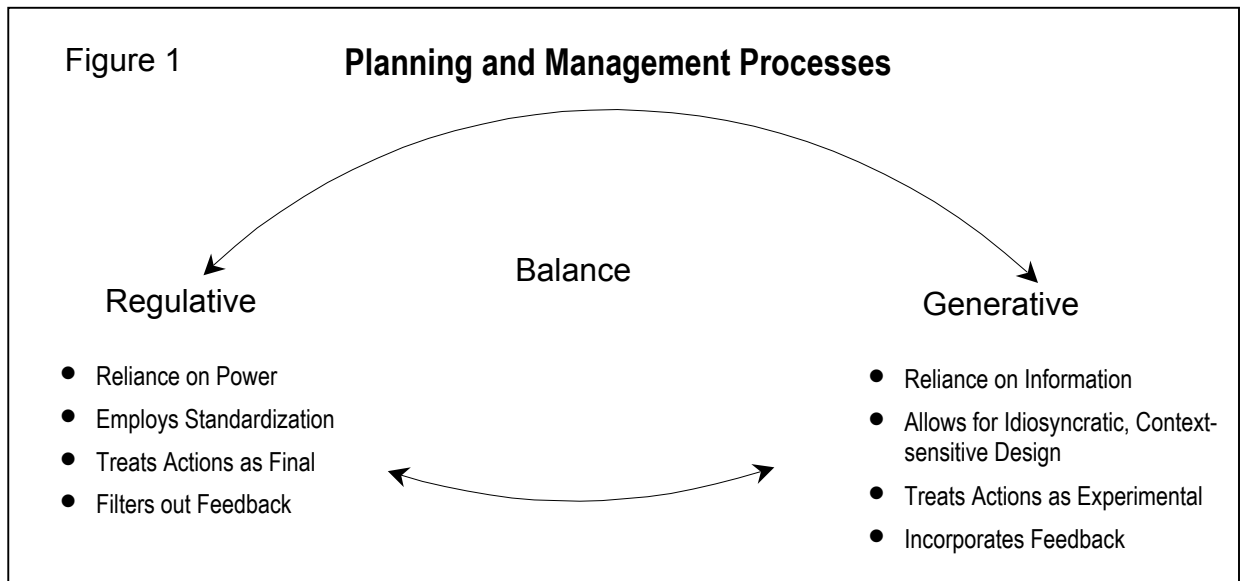
upon a foundation of proactive and strategic implementation. To achieve this, human service organizations cannot be operated through entirely generative or entirely regulative processes.

The organizations that participated in Phase I of this study demonstrated a balance between regulative and generative organizational processes that was conducive to their ability to carry out their mission and goals. The data from these sites suggest that using a theory of change supports a balance between generative and regulative functions. For example, reliable service delivery and accountability for results requires an adherence to rules and standardization of procedure that can only be characterized as regulative in nature. Regulative processes are important because they help ensure consistent and dependable access to care for children and families spanning a wide variety of community contexts and populations of focus. However, in their extreme, regulative processes typify the categorical nature of eligibility, funding, and service delivery in child-serving systems. Regulative processes often restrict the flexibility that is needed so that services can respond quickly to individual needs. In order to be strength-based and individualized, systems and programs must be able to respond in a timely manner to information that can only be provided through generative processes. A balance between generative and regulative planning and management may be necessary in order for child-serving agencies to provide individualized and responsive services and supports that respond to complex and changing family and community needs.

This balance between generative and regulative processes is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

. . . human service organizations cannot be operated through entirely regulative nor entirely generative processes.

Figure 1



Facilitating the Balance

The relationship between the identified organizational characteristics and facilitators that is suggested by this research is that, in combination, they help human service organizations establish a balance between regulative and generative planning and management.

Examples of this balance are seen across the sites. In Vermont, the collaboration between Washington County Mental Health and Social and Rehabilitative Services provides an illustration of a generative-regulative balance. On the generative side, the collaborating agencies are attempting to provide services that are strength-based, clinically appropriate and individualized. A family member describes the generative aspects of service delivery as, “the whole team is trying to get him placed in a more appropriate residential setting than the one he is in. [Systems in Collaboration] is basically a middle man to get [my] son services from other agencies.” This generative approach is challenged by a regulative need to assure

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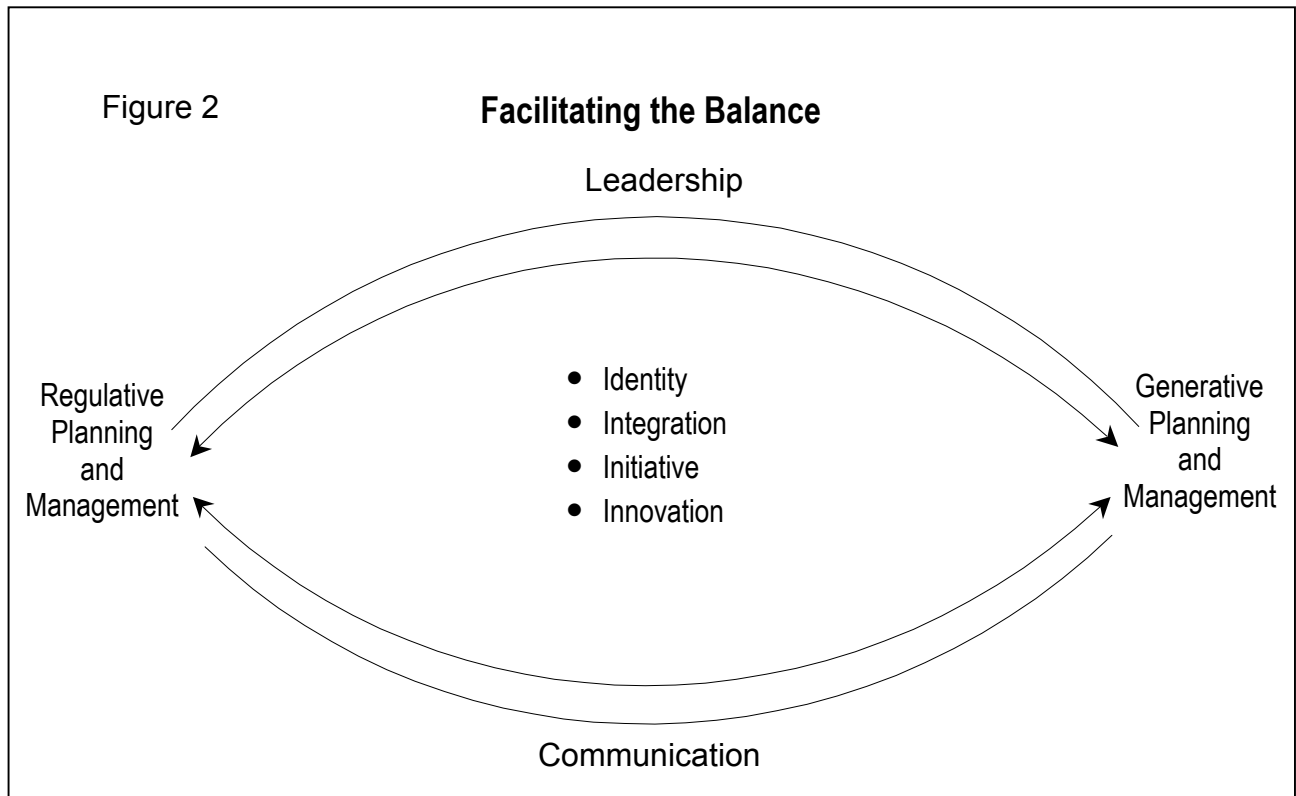
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community safety and budget resources equitably across clients. A direct service provider describes the regulative aspects of service delivery, “Each child has a budget that we have to deal with, and we’re fairly limited to ...how much time and how much money we’re able to spend on each client.... But, above that, with the population I work with, they’re restricted based on their treatment. They have to make sure the community is safe first, before [the clients are] able to go out and do things. So that’s another guideline. That [the clients are] doing their treatment and they’re safe to enter certain types of activities.”

The balance between generative and regulative planning and management is, perhaps, most notable in the Blended Funding Project where a significant structural change has altered service delivery processes and relationships. Responding to serious cost overruns, the decision was made in 2001 to shift the funding structure from one that was flexible and without limitation (completely generative) to a flexible but capitated monthly rate per child (more regulative). Some interview respondents noted that when this capitated rate has not been enough to meet the needs of an individual child and family, they have appealed to Blended Funding administration and received additional funding. However, some family members suggested that this change restricts the ability of the program to respond adequately to individual needs and may signal a shift in understanding of the theory of change. What was noted by respondents at administrative, direct service and family levels is that having a well-articulated theory of change as their foundation has allowed the program to survive in this time of significant challenge because it provided common ground from which everyone could work.

The relationship between regulative and generative planning and management is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2



Conclusions

Often, the greatest challenge to successful policy implementation is turning ideas into action. Phase I of *Community-Based Theories of Change* was designed as an inductive process to investigate how human service organizations implement policy at the local level. This phase of the study observed that operating from a clearly articulated and widely held theory of change provides an anchor that enables organizations to move from conceptualization to implementation in a way that remains true to the organization mission and goals. In addition, the study identified organizational structures and processes that support an organization's ability to carry out its mission and goals. Using a theory-based approach was not regarded as a neutral or benign action by participating sites. Although participants at each site easily identified significant benefits to having a theory of change, they also observed that the approach requires commitment and consistency in order to be maintained.

Phase II of this study will seek to confirm or disconfirm the initial findings of this study. The second phase will focus on five child-serving agencies that use the same theory of change. Document review, concept mapping and individual interviews will be used to gather information about how these agencies transfer policy agendas across their stakeholders, structural and relational factors that affect how they carry out their mission and achieve their goals, and how these organizations sustain their local service strategies over time.

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