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The Collaborative Planning Project

Facilitating Change in Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems

Collaborative Planning Project for Planning Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems

Peggy Hayden

September 1999

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Facilitating comprehensive early childhood systems is an ongoing process of complex change. It necessitates having both an awareness of research on effective practices related to systems change as well as an effective model for promoting such change. This paper presents a summary of systems change research and the Collaborative Planning Project's (CPP) model of planning comprehensive early childhood systems (Smith & Rose, 1993). This model includes: (1) Facilitator Role; (2) Stakeholder Involvement; (3) Leadership Commitment; (4) Assessing the Current Context; (5) Visioning; (6) Determining Priority Challenges to Address; (7) Strategy Development and Action Planning; and (8) Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation.

OVERVIEW

Systems change is not an isolated event in which you "change the system" by passing legislation or developing policies and procedures. As Michael Fullan (1993) puts it, "You can't mandate what matters" and "the more complex the change, the less you can force it." (p. 22). "Events" such as mandates are important. However, for the desired change to become reality, people must act. Ensuring such actions requires systemically planning, implementing and evaluating strategies that impact both organizations and individuals (Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Fullan, 1993; Senge, 1990). Research shows that we must address a variety of system issues such as: (1) having a clear sense of our current context including an analysis of those features we would like to change; (2) articulating a "shared vision" that describes what change implementation would look like; (3) providing professional development to ensure people have the necessary knowledge

and skills to enact the change; (4) ensuring adequate fiscal, human and facility resources; (5) offering incentives for change promotion; (6) providing ongoing supports to assist people with change implementation; and (7) having methods of monitoring and evaluating change implementation and impact (Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Fullan, 1993 & 1991; Senge, 1990).

Moreover, systemic change is not accomplished through plan development and implementation in a "neat", step-by-step linear cause and effect mode, because systems are dynamic - ever evolving (Mintzberg, 1994; Fullan, 1993; Senge, 1990). At the same time that we are implementing systemic changes, we must have an effective means of continuous planning and system adaptation in order to reflect both our learnings from plan implementation and the ever changing context in which the plan is being implemented related to new mandates, staff turnover, budget cuts, program growth, and so on. In short, planning is not a project we "do" and then we're done!

Applying systems change to facilitating comprehensive early childhood systems is complicated because multiple agencies and consumers make up the system. In reality, it is a "system of systems". Promoting change in just one agency can be challenge enough! Change on an interagency basis requires each participating agency to change to some degree both internally and in the ways they work with other agencies. Thus, to ensure the change process is meaningful, it must be embedded in and responsive to the needs of those agencies both individually and collectively. The following sections present key features of the Collaborative Planning Project's (CPP) model for planning comprehensive early childhood systems.

CPP MODEL

Facilitator Role

The change "facilitator" may be one person or a team. For our purposes, the term "facilitator" will refer to one person both for simplicity and because typically there is a single facilitator. The facilitator is "a person who is acceptable to all members of the group", is "substantively neutral", does not have authority over the group, and helps the "group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness" (Schwarz, 1994, p. 4). Having an "outside"

facilitator is ideal, particularly with interagency groups. However, a person in the group can serve in this role (e.g., a chair) as long as the group believes this person to be neutral in the way s/he facilitates the group and as long as processes are designed so that s/he can step in and out of the facilitator role as needed to also serve in the role of an agency representative.

Throughout the facilitation process, the facilitator's role is to build the team's capacity. Particularly for interagency groups, this group may not have worked together in the past or may even have a "rocky" history. Thus, while all of the members of an interagency group may be "high performing", the group itself may not be. The group will likely go through stages of team development: (1) getting to know each other and their task (forming); (2) sharing commonalties and differences (storming); (3) developing common ground and a plan of action (norming); (4) working together to implement, monitor, and evaluate the plan (performing); and, finally, (5) making a decision on whether to continue as a group when the plan is completed to address new issues, reconstituting the group as needed (transforming) (Fay & Doyle, 1982).

The facilitator can support group members in building their capacity to work together by helping them: (1) gather background information needed for their task; (2) adopt ground rules and procedures for running effective meetings, including producing minutes and related materials; (3) establish communication procedures among group members and within the respective agencies; (4) determine decision making parameters for the group, including issues over which the group does and does not have authority and the process for interfacing with the respective agencies' chains of command; and (5) develop the necessary structure for working together to sustain plan development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Schwarz, 1994; Fullan, 1993). Capacity building also includes developing effective interpersonal skills and relationships, without which plans and interagency agreements, no matter how well written, can only endure on paper but not in practice (Fisher & Brown, 1988). As the capacity of the group evolves, so does the facilitator's role. The facilitator has a more directive role as the group begins. Over time the facilitator's role becomes more supportive, letting the group become self-directive so that its long term success is

not dependent on the facilitator. The facilitator's first role is foundation builder, moving as needed to referee and nominalizer to make all members feel equal and valued despite their roles or job titles (particularly in the early stages). Then, as the group progresses, the role shifts to task management and then finally to process advisor (Schwarz, 1994; Fay & Doyle, 1982).

It is critical that the group believes that the planning will focus on the agenda of the group and not that of the facilitator. Even though the facilitator is "in the front of the room", the power is not; the power is "in the room", within the group members. The facilitator's role is to help the members harness and collectively focus their power. Mintzberg (1994) contends that planners (facilitators) tend to be more reflective and patient with the planning process and are apt to want to plan more comprehensively and deal with more abstract issues, because that is the "meta-position" from which they view the system. Managers (agency staff and consumers) generally view the need for change more narrowly and want to see quick results, because that responds to issues with which they deal on a day-to-day basis. Successful planning requires both. If the initial planning process is successful, they will see a "return on their investment" of their time and resources and be inclined to want to build on that success, tackling additional and more comprehensive issues at a later date. It takes time to build the capacity to work together and to own the planning (Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1999). But this time investment actually saves time in the long run, because it establishes a solid foundation for eventual collaboration on plan implementation and increases the likelihood that actions of the group will produce meaningful change. In short, you must go slow to go fast (Fullan, 1994).

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholders include consumers, line staff who will implement the plans, administrators, agency heads and boards, representatives of key groups or other agencies not directly tied to the planning process. They are the people who have a stake in the current system and/or in the future system. Their "ownership" of the effort is key to its success. Involving the array of stakeholders does not mean having everyone literally "at the table". Rather, an effective multi-level mechanism for

stakeholder involvement should be established, including having stakeholders: (1) serve on the core team that coordinates the planning with a manageable number of key representatives in decision-making / administrative positions and consumers literally "at the table"; (2) serve on action planning teams established to address priority challenges and report to the core team (usually chaired by core team members); and (3) provide input to the planning process via surveys, interviews, focus groups, supplying data / information, and / or reviewing and commenting on plans. The key is designing stakeholder involvement activities that are meaningful to the planning process and meaningful to the stakeholders themselves.

It is advisable to start with a core team of stakeholders to serve as the steering committee for the planning process. Keep the group from five to nine members, no more than twelve if at all possible, to ensure that the group size is manageable for the planning task (Daniels, 1986). The core team will decide on the planning focus which, once decided, will make it easier to identify other stakeholders to be involved and how. Frequently, in an effort to be participatory, people are recruited who "ought" to share a common interest but do not. These people are not able to see, "How this applies to me." These are usually the people who either get the group sidetracked (because they are trying to make the group's discussion relevant to them) or more often, they are the people who do not come to the meeting. Unfortunately, people frequently blame the poor attendance on "their lack of commitment", when in fact, there may not be a good fit between the players and the issues being addressed.

There are three groups of critical stakeholders: (1) agency decision-makers who will need to approve and likely finance the plans; (2) agency staff who will implement the plans; and (3) the consumers who will be impacted by the plan. It is not uncommon for members of an interagency planning team to reflect varied levels of decision making authority relative to the agencies they represent. The core team will also need to prepare for resistance to change among these stakeholders that is natural but, nevertheless, still disruptive and potentially destructive (Kanter, 1984). As Peter Senge (1990) says, "People don't resist change, they resist being changed" (p. 155).

The core team can take a number of steps to get the support of the three critical

stakeholder groups: (1) solicit input as issues are being discussed; (2) keep these stakeholders informed and involved as planning is occurring through various ways; (3) consider any "decisions" of the team as only "recommendations" until adequate input from these stakeholders can be obtained; (4) clarify decision-making parameters for the core team in light of the decision-making policies and chains of command with the various agencies; and (5) ensure that stakeholders are actively involved in fine tuning the plan during implementation as well as in monitoring plan progress and evaluating its impact. Using these strategies helps stakeholders develop ownership, influence the change in a way that is more meaningful to them, prepare for the change, and access support during the change process. Without the ownership of key stakeholders, the plan is nothing more than words on paper.

Identifying a tentative focus of the collaborative planning will assist in identifying which agencies should be invited to participate in a "core team" which will oversee or steer the planning process. To begin, the number of players needs to be manageable. It is preferable that agency representatives be people who are in decision-making/administrative capacities. One or more consumer representatives should also be involved. These individuals need to be "ready" both individually and collectively to work together. If they have a negative attitude toward change and toward each other, they are not ready to start the planning process. Starting the process at their perceived level of readiness and need is key to getting their commitment (Fullan, 1991). It is part of building the group's foundation and ownership.

Leadership Commitment

The ultimate goal is for group members to "own" the planning process. However, it is highly unusual for this ownership to be fully in place at the beginning of the process. Planning, particularly interagency planning, is charting an unknown course full of potential opportunities but also risks. Because of this uncertainty, the facilitator will need to cultivate commitment. Fullan (1993) points out that is an outcome of people interacting over time resulting in shared "learning that arises from full engagement in solving problems" as a team (p. 31).

To promote commitment, the facilitator should help the members of the team

identify needs of individual agencies as well as the community-at-large, for which collaboration could be a useful process. In short, find out "what's in it for them". Needs identification can occur on an individual and/or group basis and is critical to establishing the tentative focus for the group's comprehensive planning. A second strategy for developing commitment is for the group members to learn of similar efforts that have been successful. This can be accomplished through case studies of other communities or meeting and conversing with people from communities that have planned comprehensive early childhood systems.

Assessing the Current Context

Once a "core team" is in place to steer the planning effort, the facilitator helps them assess the current status of the issue(s) identified as their tentative planning focus. They examine both internal issues (strengths and weaknesses, e.g., perspectives of staff and consumers; existing mandates, policies and procedures; demographic information; recent successes and challenges; data on services; staffing patterns) and external issues (opportunities and threats, e.g., potential funding sources; new mandates; competition; increased demand for services / waiting lists). This assessment helps them see where they have common strengths and needs and how collaboration might be useful to them individually and collectively. A needs assessment promotes collaboration as an ongoing process for problem solving beneficial to all, rather than a "project" that will come to an end at some point. It also helps them confirm that the "tentative" focus is, in fact, the focus they want for their planning efforts.

This assessment process anchors planning in the current context of both individual agencies and the community "system". In doing so, it fosters both "systems thinking", while also making planning more concrete and relevant to the day-to-day agency operations. The more the early plans build on and relate to this agency and systems context, the greater the likelihood that meaningful change and actions will continue when the initial planning effort ends (Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1999; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Fullan, 1993).

Assessment is also a tool for group capacity building. It helps members see planning as a strategy for dealing with issues over which they may or may not have

control. That is, for issues imposed externally that seem out of members' locus of control, they come to realize that they can impact these issues through planning their response that is meaningful to their context. This is particularly critical in this age of mandates when one sometimes hears agency staff remark, "is it in the law" or "just tell me what I have to do". Such remarks indicate a reaction to changes forced on them rather than consideration of changes that they would like to see. These same individuals may think it is pointless to plan because they do not feel they are in control of their "current realities" as Peter Senge (1990) calls it.

Visioning

Based on an assessment of their current context and confirmation of a focus that is meaningful to them, the core team then determines how it would like the current reality to be changed. In short, what is the "vision" they would like to create. A vision: (1) describes what we would like things to be like at some point in the future (usually three to five years); (2) builds on the past and present but does not simply extend it; (3) is concrete and reasonably attainable, including doing some new things and taking some risks; and (4) is uplifting, compelling people to action. This vision should "create a sense of commonality that permeates" the team "and gives coherence to diverse activities" (Senge, 1990, p. 206).

It is important that this vision be "shared", because, to paraphrase Senge, visions don't perform, people do. Thus, vision development should include input of not only the core team but also the constituencies they represent. It should be more than a "piece of paper", rather, a driving force behind the actions of the core planning team and the people who are involved in plan implementation.

Initially, the "vision" may actually be a preliminary articulation of a common goal toward which the core team wants to work. A true vision may then emerge from this. Fullan (1993) echoes Senge (1990) when he explains:

> "First, under conditions of dynamic complexity one needs a good deal of reflective experience before one can form a plausible vision. Vision emerges from, more than it precedes action. Even then it is always provisional. Second, *shared* vision, which is essential for success, must evolve through the

dynamic interaction of organizational members and leaders. This takes time and will not succeed unless the vision-building process is somewhat open-ended. Visions coming later does not mean that they are not worked on. Just the opposite. They are pursued more authentically while avoiding premature formalization." (p. 28)

Determining Priority Challenges to Address

Agencies represented on the core team are likely bombarded with increasing numbers of externally driven mandates to change with limited time, resources, and skills to systemically address what Alvin Toffler (1970) calls the "Future Shock". Given this situation, Fullan (1993 & 1991) advises thinking big and starting small. That is, once the vision is established, the core team should determine the challenges to this vision and a time period in which they want to develop action plans (typically 1 to 2 years). These challenges will be the focus of planning and systems change activities during this timeframe. The facilitator should help the team establish criteria for prioritizing the challenges. Some typical criteria for prioritizing the challenges are: (1) *Impact* - Does it move us in a meaningful way toward fulfilling our vision? (2) *Niche* - Is it reflective of the mission we have or want to further develop? (3) *Immediacy* - Is it timely (a window or opportunity or a cornerstone for other things)? (4) *Consequence* - How significant is the consequence (e.g., if we do...or do not do)? (5) *Likelihood* - What is the likelihood that we can do this related to our time, funding, expertise and person power? (6) *Acceptability* - Is it socially and ethically acceptable? Could we publicly support it? and (7) *Value* - Would we be willing to give up something important to do this? Similar criteria should be used as the core team makes decisions about selecting priority issues and strategies.

Strategy Development and Action Planning

For each of the challenges articulated, action plans should be developed. Action planning teams should be chaired or co-chaired by members of the core team to help facilitate communication between these two types of teams. Action planning teams are "task groups" composed of five to twelve key stakeholders, such as practitioners and consumers, who have the knowledge to

develop effective strategies to address their assigned challenge (Daniels, 1986). Using such stakeholders in addition to core team members helps to link planning to the "level of use", that is, using input from the people who will actually implement or be impacted by plans (particularly line staff and families) (Fullan, 1993 & 1991). Plan formats can vary. However, common action plan components include: (1) objective to move the work toward the vision; (2) strategy(ies) to address each objective; (3) action steps to achieve this strategy; and (4) for each action step, person responsible, resources needed, and timeline.

Strategies and action steps should: (1) support both individual and organizational development, including job-embedded professional development; (2) start with "small" steps to effect change by successive approximation and make the change more "doable"; (3) work done in teams for networking, idea sharing and providing support; (4) use of procedures for feedback on results so that implementers are reinforced for what they are doing and/or are directed in appropriate implementation; (5) follow-up support balanced with pressure to achieve results; and (6) the integration of change into existing programs to ensure that it is context relevant (Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1999; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Barth, 1991; Fullan, 1991). The action plan ultimately becomes the "script" for plan implementation that the team can use for tracking activities and recording outcomes and impact of the strategies.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Once the plan is written, the team should celebrate. However, this is not the end, but the beginning of the implementation phase. This is where the facilitator's ongoing efforts in building the team's capacity to work effectively together pays high dividends by ensuring they have the knowledge, skills and structures necessary to work together as a team and sustain plan implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, this is the point at which, if an outside facilitator is used, team facilitation is often transitioned to one or more team members. This is all the more reason why capacity building for the team is critical.

Plan implementation, monitoring and evaluation are not three distinct steps but rather interrelated functions. The core team should establish a mechanism to coordinate these functions. Sometimes that means

establishing a new core team but most often the core team that developed the plan will be left in place with a transformed role. This new or transformed team will use the planning document to track activities to see if they are being done, and if so, what is being learned and what plan refinements need to be made. They should also track external variables (e.g., new mandates, funding sources or cutbacks, staffing issues) so that these can be integrated into the current context and aligned with and used for plan refinement - rather than losing focus and leaving the plan half implemented while they move to the new "issue du jour".

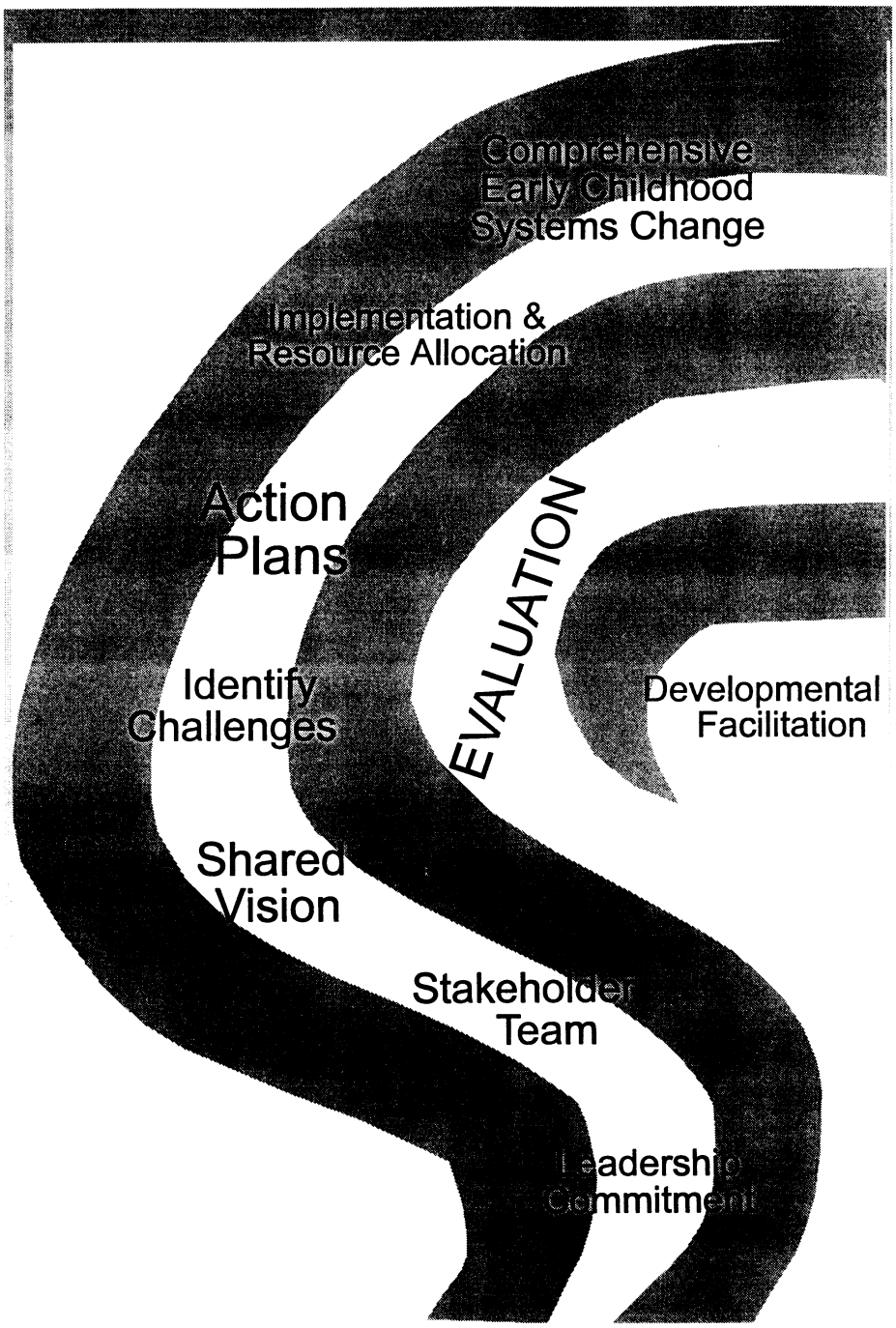
Supports during all phases of implementation are important. People do not automatically get "on board", embracing the changes called for by the plan. Research shows that as change is initiated, there is a "creative tension" between how people have always done things and the vision they want to create (Senge, 1990). Their vision pulls them forward if the vision is meaningful to them. It motivates them as they try to build new ways of doing things and thinking about things. However, until they have some success at implementing the change, their true understanding of the meaning of the change and its potential benefits is limited and their lack of "competence" erodes their confidence. They are likely to say, "things were so much easier the old way". Fullan (1991) refers to this as the "implementation dip" in which "things get worse before they get better and clearer as people grapple with the meaning and skills of change" (p. 91). Like breaking any old habit and developing a new one, it takes time. People go through various stages of concern, decision and behavior related to the change or innovation: (1) moving from needing to be made aware of the proposed change to (2) wanting more in-depth information to (3) deciding how to incorporate the change and (4) building it in to one's routine, (5) then refining the change based on practice and feedback data, (6) collaborating with others and (7) finally, adapting the change or deciding to take on new changes (Hall, Wallace, & Dossett, 1973). The core team should ensure that team members within each agency and the core team itself have *ongoing* job-embedded professional development, supports and incentives for plan implementation to ensure that people have the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they need to implement the change (Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1999).

We also know that change should be both top down and bottom up, balancing

both external motivation (e.g., mandates, funding, state or local plans) and internal motivation (e.g., those implementing the change see how it will benefit them and others who want to do things differently) (Fullan 1993 & 1991; Senge, 1990). Hopefully, stakeholder involvement has addressed this issue during plan formulation. Likewise, stakeholder involvement is critical during plan implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Information should be collected and analyzed on an ongoing basis to determine plan status and impact, to adapt the plan to the ever evolving context, and to ensure adequate supports are in place until the changes are adequately institutionalized...at which time, they will become a foundation on which to build new changes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a summary of research on systems change and the Collaborative Planning Project's model of planning comprehensive early childhood systems. It is hoped that the use of this information will assist community agencies in collaborative endeavors that will benefit them, their communities at-large, and, most particularly, the young children and families they serve.



The Collaborative Planning Project

University of Colorado at Denver

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