

Why is human services integration so difficult to achieve?

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In the last decade, greater coordination and integration of human service programs have been addressed through legislation, local innovations made possible by radical changes in welfare administration, and pilot studies undertaken with private foundation support. Yet too often, gains have been small in scale or ephemeral, and real integration a goal stubbornly out of reach.

Why are collaborative efforts so difficult to implement and sustain? Failure has commonly been attributed to “politics,” “turf battles,” or “personality conflicts” between managers. Increasingly dissatisfied with these ad hoc, individual-level explanations, researchers have sought more systemic causes, focusing on organizational factors, technology, or resources as possible barriers.

One way to understand systemic impediments to integration is to analyze the work context of front-line staff and their supervisors in human service organizations. Although it is not hard to understand and analyze core organizational technologies in a factory—the raw materials and standardized tasks that convert these materials to products—this analysis is more challenging in human service organizations where the “raw materials” are human beings who may not passively accept an imposed treatment, and the “products” are concepts such as self-sufficiency and family well-being, susceptible to multiple interpretations. However extensive the formalized rules and regulations designed to direct front-line action, the “core technologies” in many such human service organizations cannot be easily standardized. Instead, organizational technology is negotiated afresh in the daily interactions between front-line workers and clients. Under such circumstances, we might assume that the only useful analysis is likely to be very specific, limited to the particular organization being examined. However, much can be learned when we dive deeper into the specifics of a few organizational cases to learn what is analytically generalizable from their conditions.

The research reported here seeks better understanding of why human service integration remains such an elusive goal, and suggests new avenues for managers seeking

greater integration. I conducted a comparative case study using ethnographic methods, including semistructured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and content analysis of written materials, to examine the local public welfare organization and paired organizations that provided welfare-to-work services in two Michigan counties, “Dutchess” and “Dunn” (county and organization names have been changed). I carried out the research between March 1995 and May 1997, during a period of extensive changes in welfare policy and administration in the state.¹

Work and welfare in the Michigan system

In the mid-1990s, Michigan, like many other states, abandoned its education and training strategies for moving welfare recipients into jobs. The state adopted instead a quick labor-force-attachment strategy, “Work First.” Welfare-to-work initiatives had previously been run by the state’s Family Independence Agency (FIA) through contracts with private agencies. Work First, in contrast, was part of a new cabinet-level agency, the Michigan Jobs Commission. The Work First programs were operated by 26 regional Michigan Works! agencies, an assortment of not-for-profit organizations, local governments, and public consortiums that had formerly administered the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) programs.²²In 2004, the administrative structure had not changed greatly at the local level. Regional Michigan Works! agencies still receive funding from the state for workforce development activities, including Work First, and contract with private agencies to actually run Work First.

The Michigan Works! system gave maximum flexibility to local agencies to shape their welfare-to-work programs. These were, in consequence, extremely diverse.

To deliver welfare-related employment programs, the decentralized Michigan Works! system was paired with the public welfare agency, the FIA. The FIA is a traditional, statewide bureaucracy in which all county offices operate under the same administrative policy, using the same service technology and paperwork for determining and monitoring eligibility for public assistance.

At the local level, directors of county FIA and local Michigan Works! agencies were obliged, at a minimum, to sign working agreements, but daily coordination between local officers and contractors was left to local

management and staff discretion. In Dutchess County, management matched front-line staff from each agency for case conferences about particular clients. In Dunn County, there was virtually no communication between front-line staff and supervisors in each sector.

In implementing programs, the Michigan welfare and work agencies were mutually dependent. After customers applied for public assistance at the county FIA office, work-centered welfare policies required them to participate in a job search program delivered by the Work First contractor. If they failed to attend, that information was sent to the local FIA office, which made home visits to assess the situation and determine whether to impose sanctions. Customers were then referred again to Work First; sanctions were lifted only if their attendance was documented.

This distribution of tasks created many systemic problems in counties where coordination between the sectors was limited to begin with. For example, the extensive information that customers provided FIA when they first applied was not shared with the Work First agency, which had to gather the information all over again. And when clients were referred back to FIA for noncompliance with Work First requirements, no information was given about the reasons. Did the customer have child care problems, a family illness, or a broken car? Did she refuse to comply at all, or become discouraged after weeks of searching for a job?

Without coordination at this basic level, front-line staff on both sides were constantly obliged to seek information anew from customers. Referral was, moreover, a frequent event. In the 1996 program year, 73 percent of Work First clients in Dutchess County and 63 percent in Dunn County were sent back to FIA because they did not comply with program requirements. Customers who chose to were able to bounce back and forth almost indefinitely between the sectors, from referral to referral. In the end, only a small proportion of noncompliant cases were sanctioned and customers learned that despite all the rhetoric about mandatory participation, the system did not follow through on its threats.

The limited communication between the sectors also meant that staff were rarely able to answer questions about the functioning of the partner agency. When faced with basic questions from customers—"When will my day care application be processed?" "What training and services are offered in Work First?"—front-line staff frequently gave wrong answers or guessed, rather than appear ignorant.

System inefficiencies, ambiguous messages, and outright misinformation to customers persisted in spite of formal policy mandates requiring that both sectors work together in delivering welfare programs. They persisted although

the success of both sets of local offices depended on their coordination and collaboration with partner offices.

The reasons that such counterintuitive circumstances developed and were sustained are found in great part in front-line conditions in both FIA and Work First agencies. In each, daily practice created different ways of understanding the external environment and the mandated partner agency, ways that—over time—led to structural impediments that hampered the kind of collaboration that policymakers intended.

How front line conditions shape the practice of interagency collaboration

Organizational relationship with the external environment

As a large public bureaucracy, the FIA was, at the time of this study, fairly insulated from the external environment. Staff operated in a stable framework set by civil service rules and strong unions. Daily work involved mastery of detailed policies, procedures, and documentation. Contact between the FIA and the general public and other human service organizations tended to be adversarial. Social workers from private agencies would call to ask why action had not been taken, why authorization was so slow, or why additional verification was required. Such encounters reinforced the view that outsiders did not understand the technical work of eligibility determination—the rules, formal processes, and complex computer screens that must be navigated—and increased the isolation of FIA staff.

Michigan's governor at the time had sought to increase the privatization of social services and had significantly restructured and reduced the government workforce. In this environment, the private Work First contractors were yet another example of incremental privatization. Moreover, the Michigan Works! system was oriented toward output measures and financial reward. FIA staff found the new business orientation both unfamiliar and distasteful and many felt that local programs were more interested in profit than in service to customers.

In contrast, the Work First agencies had permeable boundaries with other organizations. The Michigan Works! system was (and still is) based on performance monitoring: how many clients find employment, how many retain jobs for 90 days. Because Work First was operated by diverse contractors that include schools, private nonprofits and for-profit agencies, staff spent their days interacting with colleagues in a host of diverse social welfare programs outside their own organizations—engaging clients in job search, assessing the needs of local employers, receiving referrals from the FIA.

Staff of small, contracted organizations expect to respond rapidly to a customer's needs, particularly if the customer is making a good faith effort. Staff in programs dedicated to helping people leave welfare behind will provide rides to job interviews or help them find professional clothes, sometimes going far beyond their job descriptions. In the view of the FIA, standardized processes helped guarantee more equitable treatment for all clients. But Work First staff interpreted strict adherence to the rules in the context of their own organizational norms, which they set in sharp contrast to the norms of the "rule-bound" public welfare bureaucracy.

A history of misunderstandings

In both Dutchess and Dunn counties, the Michigan Works! agencies had previously been FIA contractors through the federal JTPA programs. The county FIA offices had been displeased with the quality of these services; they believed the job agencies worked only with highly functional clients, provided incomplete documentation of progress, and in general were poorly managed. Their initial skepticism about the competence of agencies with which they were now obliged to work affected their interactions with those agencies.

The view of the Work First agencies that FIA was a resistant, uncooperative partner emerged very early. Rather than interpreting the increased standardization of forms and procedures that FIA sought as a natural stage in implementing a new program, Work First employees saw it as an unnecessary burden. When FIA referred cases with incomplete or inaccurate information, Work First staff found they had to spend considerable time "doing FIA's work." FIA rarely enforced sanctions for uncompliant participants, preferring to "work with them." It was thus more difficult for Work First agencies to achieve the high participation rates by which they were evaluated.

In Dunn County, the lack of contact between front-line staff meant that originally unfavorable impressions were unlikely to change. In Dutchess County, where staff from both agencies met monthly, regular communication did not improve but rather intensified the negative views each sector held of the other. Disagreements between the respective program managers about processing rules, staff capabilities, or customers' circumstances sometimes escalated into shouting matches.

In a system with little open communication between front-line staff, customers are important sources of information about the effectiveness of partner organizations. In both counties, anecdotes of inefficient or misguided treatment by the partner agencies were repeated throughout the FIA agencies. Work First staff members, for their part, saw FIA staff as unwilling to exercise reasonable discretion, reluctant to bend the rules even in the best interest of the participant. In two of the three organiza-

tions I examined, nearly one-third of Work First staff had themselves been on public assistance. Although such experience bolstered the credibility of staff with participants, it also informed the agency's collective understanding of their FIA counterparts as cold, uncaring, and disrespectful toward applicants.

Collective beliefs and collaborative actions

When organizations are mandated to collaborate, the collective beliefs of front-line staff become critical to service delivery. Each time staff interact with their counterparts in the partner agency, they must navigate these differing views and points of contention. On an existing foundation of skepticism and mistrust, such negotiations are especially challenging.

The difficulties of these social processes were heightened by the interdependence of the two sectors in delivering services. FIA was responsible for providing child care subsidies while customers participated in the Work First program. Within any large bureaucracy, it takes time to process applications, and sometimes additional documentation is required before a subsidy can be paid. Faced with constant questions from their customers about the source of the delay, Work First staff would call FIA. FIA workers, believing that the Work First organization did not understand the caseload or documentation tasks associated with opening a day care case, had little incentive to respond quickly, given other pressing demands on their time. Work First staff who, sometimes after several tries, finally got through to FIA workers were unlikely to contain their frustration.

To the FIA worker who was on the receiving end of an exasperated phone call, the interaction was likely further to confirm the unreasonableness of the Work First staff. Said one FIA supervisor (who by virtue of his position had little direct contact with Work First): "I cannot think of one case that I've come across where Work First put anyone to work. Our clientele have nothing good to say. There has been a terrible lack of communication."

Instances of successful collaboration between the agencies tended to be seen by staff in both sectors as exceptions, testimony to the existence of "a few good workers" in an otherwise inefficient or unresponsive organization. It was more common for staff in each organization to use the other as a scapegoat, particularly when confronted with a hostile client. At a Work First orientation for applicants, staff in one program regularly stressed the differences: "We are not here to hurt you, but to help you. You must comply with our requirements or we will refer you back [to FIA]. But we can't cut your grant. We aren't FIA."

Thus the framework of beliefs that front-line staff collectively generate about organizations in their environment can significantly impede collaboration. Initiatives under-

taken with the best of intentions can founder on mutual mistrust and exasperation.

The structural dimensions of front-line collaboration

In spite of dramatically different organizational conditions and service technologies, the front-line staff in both the public bureaucracy and private contractors I examined followed very similar routes when forming their collective judgment about partner organizations. They drew on the same sources of evidence—past relations, daily experiences, clients' stories. Through their experiences and those of their colleagues, they acquired a common set of opinions, shared and often tacit assumptions, and practices that seemed merely “commonsense.”³

These collective beliefs about partner agencies created the framework within which staff interpreted events and responded, further reinforcing the shared organizational understanding of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the partner organization. Because the common view of the partner agency was negative, there was little reason for staff or management to wish to improve communication or the efficiency of referrals, and there were ready rationales to justify inaction or hostile responses. Thus shared beliefs in turn affected service provision.

The similarity of the process observed among these public and private agencies suggests that we may be able to generalize these patterns to front-line collaboration in other human service organizations. A body of theoretical and empirical research developed over the last 15 years gives support to the belief that it is indeed possible to do so.⁴ Organizations, according to this view, do not consist merely of an exoskeleton generated from administrative charts and written rules. Instead, the social structures that guide people's actions, help them to develop appropriate routines, justify inaction, or interpret unexpected events are internal and dynamic, evolving within the organization itself, largely without conscious intent. In front-line welfare offices, these underlying social structural processes emerge in large part from the nature of daily street-level practice.

Because structural boundaries define what is rational and justifiable within the organizational context, they curtail or constrain some actions. In Michigan, the front-line workers in both sectors were handicapped or inconvenienced by a poorly coordinated system every day, yet felt powerless to change it; in their view, problems with “the system” transcended them as individuals. Yet in fact they were active participants in creating “the system.”

This research suggests, further, that the front-line structures in human service agencies may be quite rigid. For the agency staff, the knowledge they have developed

from their daily collective experience may, in other words, have greater legitimacy than new management initiatives or grandiose plans for reform that emerge from abstract ideals and political motivations. It is unlikely that the social structures that shape front-line actions can be altered by exhortation or vague initiatives promoting communication and collaboration. We need to explore further how such structures are created and sustained, and, importantly, how they might be changed. But in the interim there are some lessons that we may draw for better coordination of human service organizations.

For one, if we persist in believing that impediments to human service agency collaboration are individual—management turf issues or personality conflicts—we are likely to consider only interventions at the individual level. Agencies may sponsor executive meetings and planning sessions or put in place formal agreements for staff collocation, service referral, and sharing of information. Too often, these initiatives fail to make it into front-line practices.

A structural analysis, in contrast, directs managers to examine the deeper social processes that underpin collaboration, to pay attention to the collective experiences that staff share informally with each other. Such a perspective may enable managers to look for the points of leverage that exist for change within the system, rather than mandating collaboration on a resistant front-line staff.

The necessary leverage may be found at small, well-focused points within the organization. Managers have little control over staff experience or customers' stories, but they can use staff meetings, forums, and focus groups to elicit the prevailing beliefs about a potential partner organization and so begin to understand how past relations will likely affect future initiatives. Such an approach requires a considerable commitment of time and resources, but this research suggests that managers will be able to accomplish better, more integrated service delivery only by understanding how to shape the deeper structures in human service organizations that determine or constrain action. ■

¹This research is reported at length in J. Sandfort, “The Structural Impediments to Human Service Collaboration: Examining Welfare Reform at the Front Lines,” *Social Service Review* 73, no. 3 (1999): 324–39. IRP thanks the University of Chicago Press for permission to summarize materials in *Social Service Review*. The research is further discussed in J. Sandfort, “Exploring the Structuration of Technology within Human Service Organizations,” *Administration and Society* 34, no. 6 (2003): 605–31.

²In 2004, the administrative structure had not changed greatly at the local level. Regional Michigan Works! agencies still receive funding from the state for workforce development activities, including Work First, and contract with private agencies to actually run Work First. Since the late 1990s, communication and collaboration between FIA offices and Michigan Works! staff as well as local FIA offices and

staff from the Work First contractors have increased somewhat. At the state level, the Michigan Jobs Commission was split into two different agencies, and Work First was placed under the purview of the Department of Career Development (DCD). After a change of administration in 2002, DCD was moved into the new Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

³P. Manning, "Organizational Work: Structure of Environments," *British Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (1982): 122: "To some degree, organizations define, structure and shape the environment in which they are operating. . . . organizational members are socialized into organizational motives, contingencies, and team work; . . . they absorb tacitly shared assumptions and emergent definitions of contingent situations; and they learn the principles, working rules and practices thought to be the commonsense basis of the occupation."

⁴A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); W. Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (July 1992): 1–29.