Working Hard & Working WELL

CHAPTER 5

From Introspection to Culture Change

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An excerpt from the book *Working Hard & Working Well*, which is available in full at leapofreason.org/workingwellbook

From Introspection to Culture Change

At the end of the four-day workshop the organization will have made the kinds of fundamental decisions and clarifications that, if implemented, will allow it to perform reliably, effectively, sustainably, efficiently, and at a high level of quality. These decisions must then be captured succinctly and systematically in a document. The document should be the equivalent of an architect's blueprint: identifying key issues, specifying all operational metrics and needed actions, and guiding the next steps of the organization's development.

The blueprint is not an implementation plan. Once the blueprint is completed, the next phase of work is for the organization to map all the needed actions against timelines for completing them (i.e., to create a Gantt chart).[61] Then the organization will need to identify the resources that will be necessary to complete each item and consider how to develop and deploy those resources. In essence, such an implementation plan amounts to a business plan for building organizational competencies and capacity.

It is common for organizations to imagine that the implementation of their blueprint for performance management will be accomplished within a year or at most two. This is folly. In my experience no organization has successfully implemented such a blueprint in less than three years, and many require five years or more. When leaders and senior managers try to drive implementation too quickly,

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61. The chart is named after its originator, Henry Laurence Gantt.

they put the organization under so much stress that the staff and lower-level managers will begin to undercut progress. The under-cutting will not necessarily be maliciously motivated—it will be an expression of fatigue, and perhaps alienation that has been stimu-lated by unreasonable leadership expectations. (Some staff mem-bers might not even be aware of how their actions are affecting the organization.)

So, while it is fair to say that strong, sensible leadership and management is required during the organizational redesign work described in this book, perhaps even more wisdom is needed to lead the organization through the subsequent implementation of the blueprint—moving change forward quickly enough to secure the organization's future, but slowly enough to sustain its integrity through the transition process and beyond.

Implementing Performance Measurement and Monitoring

Organizations that are serious about implementing performance management must adopt a new motto: **"If it's not in our data sys-tem, it didn't happen."** Staff members and managers should not expect to be credited for undocumented activities, and the quality and quantity of their work should be assessed against clear perfor-mance standards using operational data. Here are some basic points:[62]

1. **It is essential to review each manager's and staff per-son's data entry weekly, at least in the first two to three months, until everyone enters data regularly without prodding**. Once that point is reached, leaders and manag-ers should continue reviewing data entry on a regular basis (although the frequency might be reduced) as part of supervi-sion and program management. After another three months, all managers and staff should be held accountable for the quality and completeness of their data.

Example: Corporate leaders of Youth Villages review the performance data for front-line staff at every site no less frequently than monthly. Because they have branches in a dozen states, and keeping program quality at all sites high is so essential, they monitor for incomplete data entry, late data entry, and performance trends—at the staff, program, site, and regional levels. Managers are held strictly accountable for the quality of the data produced by their staff, and for maintaining upward performance trends or high performance levels.

2. **Key data sets, such as client demographics, staff activities, program participation, and client outcome information, must be reviewed for missing information or inaccurate entries.** Initially, staff who have not entered their data should be reminded to do so and shown how to correct mistakes. Leaders and managers should not make the corrections themselves, unless they plan to continue doing so forever.

   Example: Congreso de Latinos Unidos produces a report to identify gaps in clients' demographic information. The organization determined that the five demographics of race, ethnicity, gender, date of birth, and ZIP code are key fields that should be completed for all participants. Each month the agency's Data & Evaluation Department compiles the demographic "gap" report and provides it to divisional quality assurance managers to handle any necessary follow-up. Every two months, the Data & Evaluation team meets with the quality assurance managers to review the overall integrity of the data system, including this report as one component.

3. **Performance-management data systems must be useful to all staff—especially front-line workers.** The most compelling reason to implement a performance-management system is to improve the quality of work, effectiveness, and efficiency of the front-line staff—because this is the pathway to better results for clients. The process of ensuring staff buy-in to the system is never completed—and is critical. If the

staff find that the software is useful in organizing, tracking, and improving the results of their daily work, they are more likely to use it enthusiastically and well. This means designing easy ways for them to do data entry and retrieve key information, with "point of service" screens that help them monitor what they are doing with each client and see how well each client is responding, as well as to develop "to-do" lists and manage their work accordingly. Over time, front-line staff—and also supervisors and managers—will become sophisticated end users of the system and request additional functions to help them even more. Such requests should be given high priority!

Example: First Place for Youth in the Bay Area of California works with young people who age out of foster care. The agency provides transitional housing and intensive work on academics and work readiness. But the heart of its approach is case management, where these young people, often for the first time in their lives, are provided sustained relationships with caring and committed adults who, while holding the youths to high standards, give unconditional personal acceptance. First Place has found that these relationships move through stages of engagement. The youth workers (called Youth Advocates) use a scale that is built into the agency's data system to measure and monitor, weekly, the state of their relationship with each of the youths on their caseload. They and their supervisors refer to this information when reviewing cases in order to develop plans to help youths who seem to have become "stuck."

4. **Continue training staff after "going live."** Nobody retains everything they learned during initial training on a new data system, so refresher courses based on feedback and what the data reveal about training needs will be useful. Training is also an opportunity to build momentum and inspire the staff by showcasing not only positive client results but also staff members whose work is improving measurably.

Example: In 2011, the municipal job center in Esbjerg, Denmark, structured training for a staff of one hundred to introduce them to a new data system. The center used generic training sessions for groups of ten participants each, regardless of the program in which they worked. To this was added individualized training specially tailored to unique program needs. The training sessions are still ongoing, although they're held less frequently, several years after implementation—and front-line staff members are using the system effectively.

5. **Tie the staff's use of the performance-management data system to job descriptions and performance reviews.** While many staff members find that such systems offer great support in their work, others may need a little push. In the end, use of the data system by staff and managers at all levels of the organization must become nonnegotiable, and how well they do so should be assessed as part of annual performance reviews.

Example: Roca, Inc., based in Boston and Springfield, MA, works with gang members and criminally involved youths. For years the organization had included "documentation of outcomes" in staff job descriptions, but there was no systematic way of keeping track of the degree to which they were doing this. Then the organization developed what it called the Staff Competency Framework. In connection with weekly supervision, program coordinators began to record in the data system itself whether the staff's data entries were complete and up to date, as well as each staff member's progress toward developmental competency goals (defined by the performance requirements of their respective roles in the organization). The chief of operations does the same for each division director and coordinator. The expectation was that building accountability into operations in a structured way would help people do their jobs better over time. And in fact it did.

My Hope

I wrote this book as a response to my perception that the social sector has failed, so far, to live up to its promise. While hundreds of thousands of social service organizations work incredibly hard to address our society's most intractable challenges and help structurally disadvantaged and socially marginalized individuals, families, and groups build better lives and life prospects for themselves and their children, few do so effectively. Indeed most lack the organizational competencies and capacity to do so.

As I've mentioned, to no small degree this failure is a by-product of an incredibly dysfunctional set of funding mechanisms where revenues come dribbling into the sector—literally as "billions of drops in millions of buckets" (Goldberg 2009)—without predictable standards and with no accountability on the part of funders to invest in agencies' organizational capacity to work effectively, reliably, efficiently, and sustainably.

However, there are courageous leaders of social service agencies who, in spite of these immense obstacles, are committed to delivering what they promise to the people they enroll in their programming. Such leaders need consultants and others who have the expertise to support them in their efforts to build up their organizations' performance-management capacity. I have had the privilege of working with a number of these leaders and their organizations, and also with some progressive funders who seek to change how they allocate resources, with a view to building up their grantees' organizational capacities and competencies. I have seen profound organizational redesigns and turnarounds—and the measurable benefits that clients have enjoyed.

But in my travels I have engaged with more than a few organizations for whom consultants had not been of much help—especially with regard to performance management. As I head toward retirement, I want to leave behind what I have learned for others to use—whether they are leaders, managers, or staff of direct-service organizations; funders; or consultants. My hope is that what I have written here—and share free of charge—will serve as a useful guide to

any individual or organization working to improve the social sector . . . one organization at a time.

Which brings me back to the psychiatric hospital where my journey began. It was an enormous privilege to be entrusted with the challenge of leading an organization that palpably needed to improve. Patients had to wait far too long to be admitted, received an insufficient amount of active treatment, were too violent, stayed too long, and returned too quickly. Yet through a sustained collective effort that, in the end, depended on the buy-in of front-line staff, we managed to turn the hospital around. It wasn't easy. We all had to learn and grow. We had to put aside early tensions and build a new organizational culture with new expectations and performance standards, new ways of working. But the payoff was incredible. Patients were admitted immediately, received many more hours of active treatment, were much less violent, got better quicker, and stayed out longer. No one in the hospital earned a lot of money; no one received much by way of public recognition. But our collective exhilaration was real because, over a period of five to six years, we created a hospital where patients received what they needed and benefited more than anyone expected. Even two decades later, the work we did there remains one of my most cherished memories.

It is this experience, in fact, that has shaped my unshakable conviction that any organization with the right leadership and good advice can do the same.

Of course, every organizational leader or consultant has had a unique set of experiences that will shape how he or she approaches the task of implementing performance management. I have written this book to help them do this work creatively and productively, using their own experiences to continue to refine the methods and possibilities offered by this approach. I have seen that others can carry on this work, building on what I have shared and inevitably improving on it. I have seen some funders shift away from traditional grant-making toward what I call social investing, which includes investing in their grantees' performance-management capacities. Those who depend on the social sector desperately need these trends to continue.