Making Change Happen

The kinds of fundamental change we have discussed elsewhere in this report are not easily achieved. Changing the culture of welfare means more than merely adopting a few new rules. It involves a deeper set of transformations of the purpose, structure, management, and assessment of social provision for the disadvantaged.

We have touched on some of the broader themes elsewhere in our story:

- The transformation of welfare from an income support entitlement to a system fostering individual and community change.
- The reorientation of management from a focus on process and inputs (what organizations and programs do) to a focus on outcomes (what organizations and programs accomplish).
- The reallocation of program control from the national government to states and local communities, which results in fundamental changes that affect decisions about program design, administration, case management, and other local operations. Virtually all the WELPAN states are pushing decision making to lower levels.
- The rededication of organizations to the original purposes of social welfare programs and systems. Rather than going through the motions of issuing checks, agencies and communities are coming together to address child poverty, family instability, community dysfunction, and other challenges that create social problems.

A Conceptual Framework

From our experience, we argue that real change cannot be halfhearted, but demands comprehensive and continuous commitment. Reforms are meaningless unless they actually alter and inform what people experience in their interactions with programs and policies.

Here we examine what we believe are the central dimensions of welfare reform—characteristics that must, we believe, be incorporated into any serious effort to change the way business is done.

As a convenient way of organizing our thinking, we have condensed these characteristics into seven dimensions of institutional life: mission, milieu, management, movement, manpower, measurement, and “morphing.”

We call these the seven M’s. They are by no means prescriptive, and we offer a few illustrations only in this brief analysis. But we hope that they point up how complex it is to change the culture of an organization or program. All aspects of the institution ultimately are affected and all must be considered in the process of change.

When I think about the culture change we’ve been through and that we need to go through, I really think about the different levels of culture change. The local office is certainly a component of that, but we also have culture change going on in the general public and in the communities about their role. We have culture change going on at the government levels, at the policy decision making level. We have culture change going on in our clients. Clearly, we are seeing behavioral change. And we have culture change that goes on in the individual members of our organization. These things are all in some ways independent but they are also very interdependent.

Doug Howard, Michigan
In the redefining of any agency’s missions, there are three primary aspects to consider:

**Clear vision**

The agency or community needs a mission or vision statement that is clear, understandable, and measurable. New missions and visions include a focus on work, individual self-sufficiency, improvements in economic well-being, and other behavioral changes that can be measured or monitored to determine success.

**Effective signaling**

Consistent signals (messages) are important to convey the new mission to the community, including potential participants. People in the community get these signals about programs in many ways. These may be as simple as what the agency calls itself or where it is located, as well as what it says in brochures and public service messages.

**Unambiguous message**

The new mission should be communicated in an unambiguous way to everyone involved in the program. Issues that may result in tensions or misunderstandings need clarification so that employees have no doubt about their own agency’s view.

For a social welfare agency, there is another crucial aspect: Whom does it serve?

Given a new mission, the population of interest can no longer be defined in narrow, categorical terms. More often these new missions strive to meld the traditional AFDC/TANF population (women and children) into the broader community that includes, for example, all low-income workers. A number of WELPAN states are reaching out to nontraditional populations.
The milieu of an institution is its environment or setting. What does it look like physically? How is it structured socially? How do workers with different responsibilities interact? Are new partnerships formed? How do managers with different institutional perspectives interact? How is the physical environment presented to staff and participants?

Three features in particular characterize the new welfare agencies:

**Collocation of key partners**

The more that the new culture involves behavioral change on the part of an individual, family, or community, the more likely that agencies will have to engage in partnerships and networks. Key providers are frequently located in common sites or areas, or otherwise linked to make communications effortless. Collocation is one of the keys to realizing new purposes.

**Boundary spanning (networking) and program integration**

Changes in the culture of welfare have resulted in agencies working more cooperatively with other community services. Extending beyond the sharing of a common physical space, this involves the integration of services and resources and the breaking down of program boundaries.

A camera crew from Des Moines came up and took the role of a client and timed themselves driving around town to go to all the different Human Service agencies, acting as an applicant, to see how long it would take to access all the services that they could do at one stop in the center. It took the better part of a day. Now when you come here, you can access four or five state agencies, depending on your needs, in a matter of minutes.

Lori Adams, Spencer, Iowa

**Common language for partners**

Expanding program boundaries of cooperation to include partners who previously have not worked closely together requires the development of a common philosophy and language.

**Management**

A transformation in the culture of welfare involves changes in communication flows and patterns of authority. In short, there is a movement away from traditional “command and control” structures to environments where professional norms and consensus management govern policy formulation and execution.
Decentralized decision making

Many agencies are moving from traditional top-down communication to decentralized approaches. Management takes place through the creation of an environment within which collaboration and team work flourish, and formal bureaucratic controls are inappropriate.

Horizontal and/or “bottom-up” communication patterns

Traditionally, the flow of information in welfare agencies has been from the top down. Agencies reflecting the new culture facilitate flows in atypical directions—among peers or from customers and workers up to higher levels of management.

Integrated management

In some cases key agency partners have integrated their management and administrative staff, creating horizontal paths of decision making and policy-making.

Manpower

Workers in agencies with transformed missions often are required to be very involved with participant families, to interact and collaborate on many levels, and to make complex, and discretionary decisions. This raises many issues for recruitment and training.

“Right-brain” (creative and flexible) staff

Prior to welfare reform, staff were required to be detail-oriented, excelling at collecting, verifying, and processing data (“left-brain” thinkers). New missions require staff who are innovative, flexible and creative problem solvers.

Worker discretion

The new culture demands workers who can make independent decisions and choices for individual participants, operating without large rule manuals.

Internalized “norms” and rules of behavior

New missions and institutional philosophies are less influential if organizational personnel do not accept and internalize the new norms and expectations. Training, incentives, feedback, or even replacement may be needed for the agency to succeed in transforming its culture.
Increasing responsibility/team players

The new culture demands that front-line workers attend to many more areas of their customers’ lives. Staff need a broader range of competencies and knowledge. They must be conversant with multiple arenas, be adept at identifying pertinent partners, and be able to refer the customer appropriately. In many situations, caseworkers must operate as part of a team, often coordinating the work of several professionals (particularly for difficult cases).

With the new system here at the Department of Human Services our old staff have had to learn to be much more social-work-oriented. In the past we had individuals who we referred to as paper shufflers. They determined eligibility. If an individual had a problem they were referred to someone else to deal with that problem. The staff here now are having to accept the responsibility of going beyond just determining eligibility to listen to the individual and try to be a social worker . . . to get them to the proper services.

Judy Crawford, Ohio

Movement

At the heart of any change in the culture of welfare operations is what participants experience as they move through the system, beginning with their first contact. The old welfare system used to be characterized by infrequent and formalized interactions with a worker who controlled the relationship. Now time matters, not just because of time limits, but also because we expect families to make progress, become more competent, and move into and upwards in mainstream society. What participants experience is shaped by the decisions and interactions they confront.

Gatekeeping (diversion) strategies

Messages (stated or implied) conveyed during the initial contact with the agency can shape the subsequent relationship and influence the direction the participant chooses—whether to pursue services or work independently or with the help of the agency. Many agencies also emphasize immediate immersion into program activities.

Continuous participation (minimal “leakage”)

A seamless flow of consistent program activities is important. “Leakage” occurs if there is lengthy time between appointments or if participants get lost in the system.

Coherent array of services

Participants should be able to package a coherent array of services and opportunities. This requires adopting the concept of wrap-around services, including follow-up case management, that meet individual needs.

Continuing contact

Consideration should be given to maintaining contact after a person is employed, and even after they leave cash assistance. Increasingly, the concern is shifting to the working poor, who need assistance with wage progression and career advancement.

Measurement

There is an old saying, “you find what you are looking for.” The selected outcomes of interest go a long way to determining the character of a program. This insight led WELPAN to focus initially on how to mea-
sure success in welfare reform. In changing the culture of an agency, it is necessary to determine what is ultimately of importance, have all stakeholders sign on to these outcomes, measure them well, and reward appropriate performance.

**Real-time monitoring**

Serious attention must be paid, and resources committed, to obtaining and using feedback on how the program is doing.

**Focus on outcomes**

Consistent, comparable, and measurable outcomes are central to the new agency mission. Agencies must move from process-oriented measures of success (what or how much they are doing) to outcome-oriented measures (what they are accomplishing).

We had an outcome model designed from day one to look at the kinds of things we want to evaluate. Some of those things are: the number of jobs posted, the number of people getting employed, the number of employers we are working with, customer service satisfaction from job seekers as well as employers.

Gary Williamson, Montgomery County, Ohio

is not an event. You don’t just DO it once and it’s over.

**Continuous environmental scanning**

In the emerging culture, policy designers and managers continuously examine what is happening in other agencies and jurisdictions. Horizontal communications (sharing among peer institutions) increase as the dominance of federal and national authorities decreases.

**Community involvement and participation**

Rather than being self-contained, the new organizations actively involve critical elements of their environment, both as partners and sources of inspiration.

**Synergy, experimentation, and growth**

Today’s social services agencies are not static. They are constantly undergoing change and transformation. New possibilities can always arise if we are alert to them. In any event, the world will keep changing, and our ability and willingness to respond must not flag.

These dimensions of change do not tell us what the new agency will look like. They inform us what those trying to transform their agencies must consider during the process of change. Policy makers can envision radically different missions, or purposes, for a transformed welfare system, yet they will find that they must address the same challenges.

The main thing that we did was to define with our community partners—the families that we work with, churches, nonprofits, daycare providers, employers, and everybody else who had a stake in the kinds of services we provide—what we really wanted to accomplish and to come up with a common vision and mission across the community and across the agencies. And based on that common vision and mission we designed our programs.

David Berns, El Paso County, Colorado

Unambiguous consequences

There should be real and substantial consequences attached to performance. That is, incentives should exist for both staff and participants, perhaps simulating some incentives built in the competitive marketplace, to reward the achievement of program objectives.

“Morphing”

We use a word from science fiction to suggest an important concept. Welfare reform