MEETING THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Utter chaos.

How else to describe the world of publicly funded human services? Budget cuts from federal, state, and local governments. Exploding caseloads. Attacks from all sides that service providers are incompetent, do great harm, and are the real menace to families and communities. The imminent arrival of ambiguous reforms in welfare, block grants, and managed care. And this ever present truth: a rapidly diminishing constituency for publicly funded human services.

In the midst of this chaos, leaders in human service organizations throughout the country are experiencing rapidly falling morale among their colleagues and employees, and growing personal confusion about what their priorities should be and how they should respond.

So what should the priorities of human service leaders be in this time of chaos? At least these:

- Help your organization understand its purpose;
- Help your organization focus on results; and
- Help your organization build an environment of trust.

UNDERSTANDING PURPOSE

The cliché still rings true: doing things right is not the same as doing the right things. Human service organizations have gotten lost worrying about doing things right. They must concentrate again on discovering the right things to do. They must redefine their purpose.

Many reformers argue that human service professionals should understand their purpose more like businesses do, and view their clients more like customers. These reformers believe that human service organizations should focus on providing high quality services to their individual customers.

Malarkey.

Malarkey?! What's wrong with focusing on delivering quality services to individual customers?

Plenty. Let's start with the term "customers." Reformers argue that the label "customer" helps focus the organization on the people it serves. Businesses provide high quality products and services to customers. If they don't provide high quality products and services, then customers buy from someone else. Human service organizations should be subject to the same marketplace discipline.

In this analysis, the power of the customer is the power to refuse to purchase from one business in favor of purchasing from another. In the marketplace, customers have this power because, for most products and services, many businesses compete for the customer's patronage. Rarely does such competition exist in human services. And when government attempts to bring the discipline of the marketplace to human services, as with the managed care experiments now underway in

Massachusetts and elsewhere, the early evidence suggests that private sector firms will cut services to the poorest families and communities because they cannot profitably offer such services.

More to the point, even when the customer has many services or products to choose from, the power of a customer is not much power. The power to choose between competing services is far less than the power to act as a competent and caring parent, to provide for one's family and care for one's friends and neighbors, to create one's future.

If human service professionals want to help solve the problems plaguing our families and communities—drugs, teen pregnancy, illiteracy, unemployment, violence, and the rest of the familiar litany—then treating the individuals they work with as customers is not the answer. That's a perfect example of doing things right.

Publicly funded human services, no matter how high the quality or how efficiently delivered, can never solve these problems. Only communities and families can solve these problems. For human service organizations to help then, they should focus less on doing things right and more on doing the right things. They should focus less on efficient service delivery to isolated individuals and more on building the capacities of individuals, families, and communities to solve their own problems and create their own futures.

What would that look like? Maybe like this:

- All employees, including senior and middle managers and front line workers, are evaluated on whether the individuals they work with increase their capacity to solve their own problems.

- Front line workers constantly look for opportunities to help the individuals they work with develop other relationships of support and caring.

- Public agencies seek partnerships with community organizations who have proven track records of developing effective community leadership.

- Public agencies undertake only those initiatives that are designed and implemented with active involvement from the community leadership in the targeted area.

- Each human service organization develops its budget with deep involvement by community leaders and organizations who are regular partners of that organization.

This list is only suggestive. The point is this: in this time of chaos, human service leaders must challenge their organizations to shift their focus from service to capacity building, from providing quality services to individual customers to helping individuals, families, and communities develop their capacities to solve their own problems and create their own futures.

The first question a human service leader should be asking members of her organization is: what is our purpose? The second is: what results are we getting?

Focusing on results actually requires an organization to answer three questions:

- What results will we hold ourselves accountable for achieving?
- How will we know if we have achieved these results?
- How will we foster our capacity to learn and innovate to continually improve our results?

Many reformers and writers have deplored the endless reporting requirements federal and state governments impose on local governments and human service agencies to document work performed. These requirements developed for a good enough reason: the people charged with monitoring the use of federal and state dollars wanted to make sure that local agencies did what they said they were going to do when they got the money.

Over time, however, these reporting requirements have become more complex, often conflict with each other, and require enormous organizational resources to manage. But that's not the worst part: the worst part is that these requirements tell organizations nothing about whether what they are doing helps children, families, and communities. Of course it's important for an organization to document that the money it said it was going to spend on conducting a parenting skills class was in fact spent on conducting that class. But such documentation reveals nothing about whether the parents in that class learned anything, whether their lives or the lives of their children are better because of the class.

For an organization to know whether or not it is making a difference, it must learn to focus on results. Leaders must work hard to develop shared agreement about the results the organization will hold itself accountable for achieving. For example, if an organization claims its purpose is to help individuals, families, and communities develop their capacities to solve their own problems and create their own futures, then everyone in the organization must understand the specific capacities in children, families, and communities the organization will devote its resources to help develop. Without a shared agreement about results, people within the organization will pursue their own agendas for their work and may soon find themselves working at cross purposes with each other.

Once an organization has shared agreement about results, it must then develop adequate systems to give everyone in the organization good information about whether the results are being achieved. This information cannot come to the leader alone. It must be available to everyone in the organization so that everyone has a stake in achieving the results.

Our culture's stereotype of a leader portrays a lone, usually male individual who has THE VISION and inspires his "troops" to follow him with moving speeches and exhortations. Such a picture suggests an organization in which one person has the power and makes the decisions for the rest of his subordinates to implement. In such a structure, employees are not expected to

think, learn, and create. They passively accept orders from the boss and implement them as efficiently as possible.

While perhaps functional in less dynamic times, such an organization will fail miserably in times of extraordinary change. It cannot learn and adapt quickly enough because all learning and adaptation can originate only with the boss. In these chaotic times, no one person can possibly have all the data, experience, intuition, and judgment necessary to chart a course of effectiveness for their organization. We have to develop entire organizations capable of learning, learning organizations in Peter Senge's terms.

The truth is, we don't know how to accomplish much of what we hope to accomplish. We are only starting to combat the complex interactions of poor economic opportunity, social isolation, poor education, violence, social pressures, drugs, illiteracy, fractured families, teen pregnancy, and other stresses. Our categorical responses to these problems have not been sufficient to the task of improving the lives of our most vulnerable children and families.

To develop more effective initiatives to support children, families, and communities requires a commitment to learn what works and what doesn't. This learning cannot be done by one person. It must be done by the entire organization in partnership with the families and communities the organization hopes to benefit.

For an organization to focus on results human service leaders must commit themselves to building learning organizations. And crucial to the development of any learning organization is an environment of trust.

BUILDING AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST

Without an environment of trust, few organizations will muster the will and courage necessary to undertake the difficult work of redefining their purpose and maintaining a consistent focus on results. Too much organizational energy will be expended on in-fighting, blaming, and other self-protective and organization-defeating behaviors. Little energy will remain for learning and pursuing healthy adaptive strategies.

If we seek an environment of trust, we must begin by being trustworthy. What does it mean for a leader to be trustworthy?

It begins with integrity. A story about Gandhi illustrates the power of integrity. Gandhi was scheduled to address a joint session of the British parliament about his dream for a free India. As the time for his speech neared and the room filled with all of Great Britain's key leaders, the tension in the room was palpable. Gandhi had been organizing against British rule in India for years, causing England some economic disruption and great international embarrassment. The leaders gathered in the room were fully prepared to reject the message and the messenger.

When Gandhi walked in the room, the audience grew quiet. People were amazed at how small he appeared. Even more startling, he wore only homespun cloth.

Gandhi approached the podium, and for the next two hours spoke without a note about the dreams of his people for a free India, and about his hopes for a powerful partnership between India and England.

At the end of his speech, almost in spite of themselves, people leapt to their feet in a thunderous standing ovation. As the audience continued to applaud and call his name, a reporter standing in the back rushed to the podium to try to speak with Gandhi. Unable to get to him, the reporter cornered an aide and asked him: "What just happened here? I don't believe what I saw. Before Gandhi spoke, this audience was ready to hang him. He comes in here, speaks for two hours, not even a single note, and now has this audience literally adoring him. How did he do that?"

The aide paused for a moment and then spoke: "I have seen him do this so many times. I still don't quite understand it. All I know is that for Gandhi, what he thinks he says, and what he says he does. You and me, usually we think one thing, say another, and do a third. We have to have notes just to keep up!"

Leaders acting with integrity, saying what they think and doing what they say, will help build an environment of trust. So will developing the capacity for deep listening.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Principled Centered Leadership*, asserts that the key to having influence with another human being is the willingness to be influenced by that human being. To create trust with someone requires that we demonstrate a commitment to understand his truth. We do not have to agree with him to build trust, only to commit to listen deeply to understand him, to understand how he sees the world. If we offer someone this deep listening, and they believe they are understood, they will be far more likely to offer us the same commitment. In such an environment, where each person is honestly seeking to understand the perspective of the other and honestly claiming their own perspective, breakthrough learning can occur.

Conversely, if the other person believes that we have no commitment to understand him, to understand his truth, he is far more likely to respond with hostility or indifference to our perspective. The result: an organization tied in knots, full of resistance, tension, and passive aggressive behaviors, an organization capable of little learning and creativity.

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

A leader's demonstrated integrity and commitment to deep listening will help build an environment of trust. So will her humble confidence, her sense of humor and perspective, her clarity about expectations, her consistency, and many other traits and behaviors cataloged in countless texts on leadership.

The essence of effective leadership, however, lies in a simple statement by Gandhi: "We must be the change we seek."

As leaders, if we seek an organization that builds the capacity of individuals, families, and communities to solve their own problems and create their own futures, then we must help

develop the capacities of the members of our organizations to meet their own challenges and participate in creating the future of the organization.

If we seek an organization focused on results for the families and communities we serve, then we must be willing to be accountable for the results we commit to achieve within our organizations.

If we seek an organization dedicated to learning, then we must be learners. If we seek an environment of trust, we must be trustworthy. If we want our ideas to be heard and respected, we must begin by hearing and respecting the ideas of others in our organization.

We must be the change we seek. It's as simple, and as difficult, as that.