

The Sounding Board

Surviving and Thriving in Child Welfare

Child welfare is a difficult profession due both to day in day out high stakes decision making regarding children's and parents' lives and organizational environments that severely limit the autonomy and initiative of caseworkers, supervisors and middle managers. A formula for producing stress harmful to health and well-being is to combine heavy responsibilities with limited control in determining how work is performed and inadequate resources to help troubled and impoverished children and families. By this standard, public child welfare agencies seem designed to produce unhealthy stress and emotional exhaustion for line staff and supervisors. Given the demands of child welfare positions, the disempowering organizational cultures of child welfare bureaucracies and starting salaries of less than \$40,000 and top out salaries of less than \$60,000 in most states, it is not surprising that several studies have found turnover rates of 20-30% in public child welfare.

Nevertheless, there are many veteran staff who work or worked in child welfare agencies for decades, and some of these veterans have thrived in challenging work environments. Thriving in an organizational environment does not necessarily mean advancing up a chain of command. Promotion may reflect recognition of ability and leadership potential; but in poorly functioning organizations rising in a chain of command may require mirroring traits, attitudes and values of inadequate, incompetent or (even) corrupt managers. Promotions can be professionally and ethically ruinous in some circumstances. In addition, I have also seen some promising social workers with MSWs promoted to supervisory positions too quickly before they achieved expertise in a casework position, not a good thing for either the person or organization regardless of how it may seem at the time.

What does it mean to thrive in human service organizations? By my lights the following are indicators:

- Engaged
- Challenged
- Creative
- Productive
- A high level of expertise/ professionalism
- Continuous learning
- Respected by peers and community professionals
- Strong sense of mission

Thriving in any profession that brings one into daily contact with human suffering and that requires difficult decisions regarding children's lives requires rewards that will afford protection to practitioners from physical and emotional exhaustion. Given that positions in child welfare are poorly paid, and do not contribute to social status in the community, the rewards that sustain caseworkers, supervisors and middle managers fall into three categories: (1) the opportunity to develop and exercise complex assessment, case management and decision making skills (2) the camaraderie and social support resulting from cohesive units or teams and (3) a sense of accomplishment associated with exercising influence on behalf of children and families(Stalker, et al, 2007).

Thriving in a difficult profession means enjoying the performance of duties that others may find onerous and painful; and it is the development of expertise that makes this possible. One reason that so many caseworkers in child welfare leave agencies in the first couple of years of employment is that they experience the day in day out work as painful, anxiety producing and exhausting. Inexperienced caseworkers usually fully grasp that they have not been adequately equipped by training programs for their jobs; and they may live in fear of making mistakes in judgment that can cost children their lives or result in breaking up families unnecessarily. These staff sometimes compensate for their insecurity, lack of skills and understanding by working harder, even obsessively, and worrying constantly about the children on their caseloads. Other staff may resolve anxiety through emotional detachment and numbing, and develop a procedural and compliance oriented approach to the work. All these staff seem to care about is policies and procedures, and their response to trainers or supervisors is often "Just tell me what to do." These practitioners sometime seem contemptuous of thought or reflection, or of an insistence that managers provide a sound rationale for their directives or initiatives. Both groups, i.e., obsessive worriers and rigid rule followers, of caseworkers and supervisors are likely to suffer from a variety of stress related physical and emotional ailments, for example sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, depression; and both groups are likely to experience their jobs as a difficult daily struggle that they fantasize about escaping from or plan to leave at the first opportunity.

In the first year or two of work in child welfare, caseworkers must usually depend on supervisors for guidance in the work and for emotional support. Studies of retention in child welfare commonly find that the perceived quality of supervision is the key factor influencing turnover rates (Ellett, 2007). Because supervisors are so important to caseworkers in child welfare, they may find themselves idolized, or hated and despised when they are viewed as inept or punitive. Over the years, I have encountered a number of capable managers who longed to return to supervision because of the love and appreciation of their staff and of community professionals they experienced before the sad day they were promoted to middle management.

The change that makes thriving in child welfare possible is this one: the tasks and challenges initially experienced as onerous and painful begin to be experienced as rewarding challenges. The expert exercise of complex skills energizes rather than depletes. I had worked six years as a caseworker in child welfare before this change occurred in my experience of the work. Until this point, I was so chronically anxious about making critical mistakes that learning how to do the job better was difficult. I was usually tired, often exhausted, and I survived by promising myself I would leave the agency within 6 months, a year, etc. One day, mysteriously, my anxiety about making mistakes suddenly vanished, almost as if someone (not me) had flipped off a light switch. From that day forward, the work became enjoyable, never easy, always challenging, but nothing to be afraid of. I began to study child welfare in a serious way, and I became more engaged in the community with agencies and professionals who worked with abusing and neglecting families. I also learned new skills more easily. I thrived in the work only when I enjoyed it on a daily basis, and I could not enjoy the work until I had enough confidence in my skills and knowledge to neutralize fear of screwing up.

It is obvious that many caseworkers with other job opportunities will not continue to do painful and exhausting work for several years on the off chance that they will eventually enjoy the challenges of child protection and other child welfare jobs. Training programs must be developed that will help inexperienced caseworkers acquire useful skills and knowledge more quickly; and supervisors need to take on an active teaching and coaching role with new staff. The key to developing complex skills in any profession is practice, practice, practice and timely and expert feedback on performance. Information is not enough. For this reason, training programs around the country have begun to utilize

performance coaching in field offices as a means of enhancing the learning process. However, having a coach accompany a newly hired caseworker on a single home visit is not the kind of intensive ongoing feedback that is needed.

Coping with Bureaucracy

As I became more engaged with the work, I became angrier about the management of child welfare agencies, top down, compliance oriented regulatory environments in which managers rarely interacted with line staff, focused first and foremost on institutional interests, were uninterested in workload issues or, for that matter, in any aspect of casework practice unless cases had political ramifications or audits were pending. Over the years, I have sometimes worked for able and even inspiring managers of child welfare agencies, but the bureaucratic paradigm that dominates child welfare management has not changed, and in some ways has become worse in recent years (Westbrook, et al, 2006). In a fully realized child welfare bureaucracy, every aspect of casework and supervisory practice is prescribed by detailed policies and procedures, innovation comes only from the top of the organization, consistency of practice is a primary organizational value, and top managers are far more attuned to the persons above them in a chain of command or in the state's political structure than to community stakeholders such as judges, foster parents, advocacy groups or their staff. Since ignoring courts and community interests is a highly imprudent and dysfunctional approach to management of child welfare agencies that need all manner of assistance and services from other community agencies, capable child welfare leaders tend to invest heavily in creating community alliances and collaborations; but for the most part manage their agencies through bureaucratic methods that are rarely questioned.

In this bureaucratic environment that is inherently disempowering, caseworkers, supervisors and middle managers must seek opportunities for initiative and acquire influence that allows them to be effective. Acquiring influence is the most straightforward challenge. Caseworkers usually begin their jobs with no influence either within the child welfare agency or with community agencies and professionals who serve their clients. One of the first developmental tasks of inexperienced caseworkers is to acquire the influence to convince other employees in the agency, and professionals, advocates and foster parents to give assistance as needed and provide resources to children and parents. Caseworkers also need to be able to speak up with the assurance of being respectfully heard by peers, their supervisor, attorneys and advocates.

Dependability, trustworthiness, conscientious performance of duties, a sense of humor, appreciation of other's strengths, willingness to help other unit members, camaraderie and truth telling build influence within work units; but managers may have infrequent opportunities to observe or evaluate caseworkers' performance and tend to rely on supervisors' reports regarding caseworker competencies. For this reason, it is next to impossible for caseworkers to advance in most child welfare agencies unless their supervisors hold them in high regard; and the same rule applies to promotional opportunities at all levels of large child welfare agencies.

Caseworkers, supervisors and managers need influence in the community to be effective, and the principles for acquiring influence are much the same for all three groups. Dependability, trustworthiness, competence and promise keeping are as important in the community as within the public agency; but, in addition, child welfare staff at any level acquire influence when they are easily accessible to lay persons and professionals outside the agency, responsive to their interests and able to demystify and unstick bureaucratic processes necessary to get someone paid, or their complaint heard, or to explain the rationale for agency decisions. Shared decision making regarding case plans that includes community professionals on a systematic basis is a source of influence, as are collaborative

initiatives and other means of including community professionals in decision making. The most effective child welfare managers gradually come to realize that giving away some power in decision making is a source of power when other human service agencies make their services more readily available to child welfare families.

Child welfare staff at all levels can acquire influence up the chain of command (there are tried and true ways of doing this), with their peers and employees whom they supervise and in the community. I have seen a number of instances in which supervisors have lost the confidence of their managers, but enjoyed enormous influence with community professionals and/ or their peers and caseworkers due to their professionalism, dedication and daily involvement in case decisions. It is not unusual in child welfare for supervisors to have more influence in the community than middle managers, who often seem to struggle to make their influence felt.

A formula for thriving

Strong social support (ideally membership in a cohesive unit or management team), daily enjoyment of the application of expertise and influence within the child welfare agency and community leads to a sense of self- efficacy (Ellett, 2007) that has the following dimensions:

- Commitment to various child welfare goals
- Initiative
- Creativity
- Risk taking
- “Owning one’s practice”, i.e., personal accountability
- Continuous learning
- Alliances with influential persons and groups

Finding the social space, permissions and opportunities for initiative, creativity, risk taking and continuous learning in many child welfare agencies can be difficult. Top managers in child welfare are enamored of top down statewide initiatives that can make or break their reputation; as a result staff at all levels tend to suffer from initiative fatigue. After meeting the overwhelming demands of multiple agency initiatives, there may be no energy left over for creativity or initiative at the local level.

Of course, some staff find creative outlets in the planning and implementation of statewide initiatives, and these staff often prosper and thrive within a bureaucracy. I have known a number of outstanding child welfare managers who have been able to enthusiastically and creatively commit themselves to various initiatives originating in legislation or the decisions of an agency director. Most staff, however, must find opportunities for initiative and creativity in spite of agency demands and practices that seek to absorb their total energies. Furthermore, to fully mobilize the creative energy and talents of staff at all levels, initiative and innovation must be encouraged at the local office and unit levels.

I have occasionally asked veteran staff about the experiences in child welfare they found the most rewarding. Two common inter-related responses have been common: the veteran was part of a work group that created something new and valuable, e.g., a tool, policy, collaboration, practice model, training program, etc., for the agency, or the veteran was part of a cohesive team with a strong sense of mission that fully tapped the strengths of team members without regard to position in the hierarchy, personal egos or status. The lessons I take from these responses is that creative application

of expertise is a source of free energy (one of the few); and that dedicated professionals can indeed occasionally transcend their egos in a group effort that contributes to the common good, but (alas) only fleetingly. Nevertheless, veterans who have experienced bursts of creative energy applied effectively to the common good and who have risen above self-interest and self-concern, if only for a limited period of time, have an expanded sense of what's possible both in child welfare and in other endeavors.

Thriving in child welfare feeds on a sense of accomplishment, and the confidence to engage in risky initiatives is frequently essential for achievement. It is often remarked in child welfare agencies that adoption staff rarely leave their jobs because they are appreciated by adoptive parents and have the experience of placing children in good permanent families. Accomplishment of visible concrete positive results and outcomes, and the appreciation of persons who receive the benefits of these accomplishments are at the heart of thriving in child welfare.

References

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