



Systems of Care Leadership Series

In 2003 the Federal Children’s Bureau funded nine demonstration grants, across 18 communities, to test the efficacy of a system of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. This 5-year initiative, *Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care (Systems of Care)*, focused on infrastructure development to strengthen the capacity of human service agencies to support families involved in public child welfare through a set of six guiding principles:

- ▶ Interagency collaboration
- ▶ Individualized, strengths-based care
- ▶ Cultural and linguistic competence
- ▶ Child, youth, and family involvement
- ▶ Community-based approaches
- ▶ Accountability

To support grant communities’ efforts in building systems of care and to learn more about systems and organizational changes within child welfare, the Children’s Bureau established the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care (Center).

As the Systems of Care initiative progressed, it became clear that leadership was an essential component for successful implementation. To understand this critical aspect further, the Center’s national evaluation team conducted an indepth qualitative study, *Leadership in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*. The study draws on qualitative data collected in interviews with key stakeholders across participating communities to describe the characteristics of effective leaders and explore the processes they use to achieve systems and organizational change.

To help put research into practice, the Center developed a series of action briefs on key leadership topics for administrators and program managers responsible for systems change initiatives. These action briefs highlight key findings from the leadership study, share lessons learned by Systems of Care grantees, and outline key steps for initiative leaders to advance systems and organizational change.

Leadership in Systems of Care: Creating and Communicating a Shared Vision

To promote systems of care effectively, leaders need a purposeful vision that clearly identifies where the system is going. Drawing from the Systems of Care leadership study¹ and experiences of the Children’s Bureau Systems of Care grant communities, this brief describes:

- What a shared vision is and why it is important
- The critical role of leadership in promoting a shared vision
- Essential characteristics of successful leaders
- Key steps in developing and communicating a shared vision

The brief also includes resources for more information on creating and communicating a shared vision.

What Is a Shared Vision and Why Is It Important?

Vision can be thought of as *the image stakeholders have for what they want the system of care to be* (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2007, p. 12). As described in the Community Tool Box (Axner, 2010), a vision is like a “billboard image of what you are working towards...[It] gets your ideas across powerfully, accurately, and quickly.” Exhibit 1 presents sample vision statements from communities working toward systems of care.

A vision statement expresses where a system is headed, thereby setting a direction that helps guide choices of what to do to move in that direction (Frizzell, O’Brien & Arnold, 2004). A shared vision is important because it helps build a foundation for various stakeholders to work together toward systems and organizational change. While the perspectives and priorities of child welfare administrators may differ from those of partner organization administrators, agency staff, families, and community

¹ For more information on the full study, see *Leadership in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative* at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.



Exhibit 1: Sample Systems of Care Vision Statements

“Keeping our children safe through healthy families and strong communities.”

– *Jefferson County System of Care (Colorado)*

“We envision a future where all children and families we come in contact with can access coordinated services that contribute to their social, educational, cultural, and economic development within their neighborhood. We are working with communities to create a city in which people and systems with different strengths and perspectives work together for the safety of children and families.”

– *CRADLE in Bedford-Stuyvesant: A Systems of Care Initiative (Brooklyn, NY)*

members, a shared vision can help all stakeholders understand where their interests intersect and where there is common ground. A shared vision provides a focal point around which strategic plans can be developed. Moreover, a strong shared vision can motivate and inspire action toward common goals that support the vision.

The Critical Role of Leadership in Promoting a Shared Vision in Systems Change

Vision is a key component of leadership that contributes to successful transformation of an organization or broader system (Hornberger, Martin & Collins, 2006; Kotter, 1995). The national evaluation of Systems of Care (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010) confirmed what other studies of systems change have long found—that leadership is essential for setting the stage for and advancing a new strategic direction.



The Systems of Care initiative charged grant communities with changing the way business was conducted and forging a new future that focused on systems of care principles. This required several fundamental changes, among them that child welfare agencies collaborate with other agencies to offer community-based and culturally relevant services tailored to individual needs and strengths of children and families. Moreover, a transformative shift occurred in providing families involved in the child welfare system with a voice in planning and decision-making processes. To overcome resistance to these changes and successfully implement Systems of Care, dedicated leaders were needed to guide the direction of the initiative and keep staff motivated to work toward a new way of thinking about child welfare.

“Without a sensible vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing and incompatible projects that can take the organization in the wrong direction or nowhere at all.”

– *Kotter, J. (1995). Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail, p. 63*

The systems of care principles and underlying values serve as a foundation for a shared vision. It becomes the job of the leader to articulate those principles and then have stakeholders frame them to fit their particular communities. Leaders must communicate the vision to internal and external stakeholders, articulate the benefits that will come as a result of achieving the vision, and inspire others to translate the vision into reality.

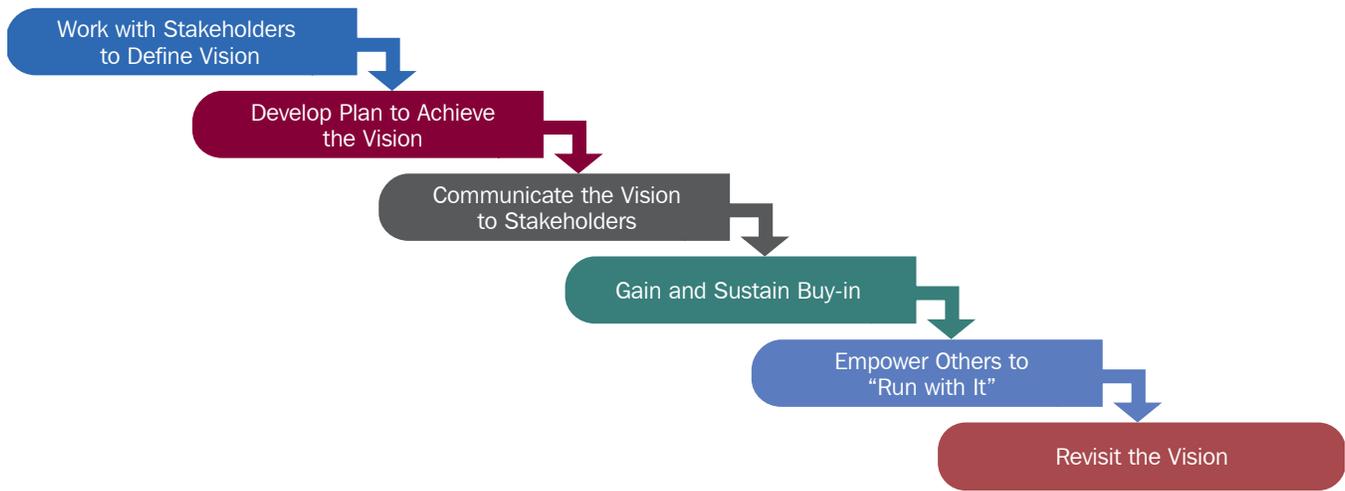
Essential Characteristics of Successful Leaders

Systems of Care stakeholders identified several characteristics or qualities that contributed to effective leadership, particularly as it related to creating and communicating a shared vision:

- **Ability to listen.** Listening is a vital part of leadership and building a vision that is meaningful to a broad base of stakeholders. Successful Systems of Care leaders aimed at understanding people's points of view on what was and was not working in child welfare, as well as what they would like to see. They then explored ways to align the vision and plans with stakeholder values. This approach helped leaders determine how Systems of Care was relevant and beneficial to these individuals and their organizations, an important step for garnering commitment to work toward the vision.
- **Flexibility.** Effective leaders needed to be flexible and make adjustments as necessary, particularly when a particular aspect of a plan was not evolving successfully. In the process of implementing systems change, leaders typically had to revise their action plans to achieve their goals.
- **Perseverance.** While flexibility was important, leaders also had to show perseverance by keeping the guiding vision and goals in mind. One leader acknowledged that in the process of creating systems change, "there will be push back and it may seem easier to change the course...[However] an effective leader is strong in his or her position, knows what is important, and is willing to do whatever it takes to get [the vision] done."
- **Credibility.** Stakeholders asserted that for the vision to be achieved, leaders must have credibility. Steadfast leaders were viewed as credible, as were leaders who were honest and openly acknowledged problems or challenges. Leaders also must be comfortable making decisions.
- **Resourcefulness.** Stakeholders indicated that leaders must be willing to use available resources and balance budget and staffing restraints, which sometimes requires appealing to partners for support or exploring grant opportunities to achieve the vision.



Exhibit 2: Key Steps in Developing and Communicating a Shared Vision



Key Steps in Developing and Communicating a Shared Vision

The experiences of the child welfare agency-led Systems of Care communities point to six key steps for developing and communicating a shared vision (see exhibit 2).

Step 1: Work With Stakeholders to Define the Vision

Soliciting input for the vision statement through an inclusive process is essential to ensuring credibility and buy-in. Successful leaders begin by listening to people’s hopes and dreams for the system and then framing them in a way that all stakeholders can see themselves in the resulting vision statement. A variety of communication vehicles—such as individual interviews, focus groups, surveys, and town hall meetings—can be used to solicit input for the vision statement.

During the startup phase of the Children’s Bureau Systems of Care initiative, leaders confirmed the importance of working with a broad base of stakeholders to develop a shared vision that reflected the systems of care principles. Some leaders at the child welfare agency administration level started with their own vision for the initiative but soon recognized

the importance of bringing together other stakeholders to define the vision and then develop a strategic action plan for moving forward. In planning meetings, several leaders included top-level child welfare agency staff, program staff, family members who had been involved in the child welfare system, and interagency collaborative partners to develop the vision for the Systems of Care initiative in their communities. Through their participation, family and community members played important roles, sharing their experiences, and provided input to inform and support the visioning process. Stakeholders noted that when people believe their views are important and connected to a common goal, they are more likely to feel a part of the vision and be willing to work to achieve the initiative’s goals.

“A vision is effective only if it is shared by those who are necessary to its implementation. In most cases, that means that the articulation of vision must be a negotiated process in which those who will implement the vision will have a voice.”

– Garner, L. (1989). *Leadership in Human Services: How to Articulate and Implement a Vision to Achieve Results*, p.19.

Systems of Care leaders aligned their vision with the mission and underlying values of the child welfare agencies, as well as those of other participating organizations, which generally relate to helping children and families. A clearly communicated vision statement tied to helping children and families can reinforce the underlying purpose of systems of care and help motivate stakeholders. In fact, given a list of potential contributors to success, community collaborative members reported that the greatest facilitator for Systems of Care work was that “partners have the needs of children and families in mind” (National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Systems of Care, 2010, p. 29).



“A leader must begin by explaining the vision and organizing the plan into small pieces, providing a roadmap so staff can understand how to achieve the vision.”

– *Systems of Care Project Director*



Tip From the Field

Consider neutral consultants to facilitate visioning meetings. Leaders who brought in outside consultants found that because the consultants were external to child- and family-serving systems, they could engage meeting participants in interactive problem solving and facilitate a neutral environment where participants could ask difficult questions and confront assumptions.

Step 2: Develop a Plan to Achieve the Vision

After Systems of Care communities defined their visions, the leaders, in conjunction with stakeholders, developed strategic plans that outlined how they intended to achieve them. Plans include the strategies and activities to be undertaken to support the vision and achieve related goals and objectives (see exhibit 3 for definitions of strategic plan elements). Strategies might include, for example, interagency communication mechanisms, policy and practice changes, and trainings. In addition to laying out a clear and realistic process to follow, a well-designed plan helps to track progress and measure results.



Tip From the Field

Use logic models. Logic models can be powerful tools to illustrate how a community intends to reach its vision. Logic models delineate the various activities required to bring about change and the relationships between planned activities and anticipated short-term and long-term outcomes. Reviewing the logic model with project stakeholders helps to ensure consistent expectations and helps assess results against expectations. As one Systems of Care evaluator advised, “Identify goals and benchmarks for success and track progress...communicate all this to everyone involved...Make sure what you are measuring is what you are doing, not what you hope to effect later.”

Step 3: Communicate the Vision to Stakeholders

Stakeholders reported that routine communication with staff members and partners was vital to keep stakeholders focused on the end goal and ensure the success of the Systems of Care initiative. To communicate their vision, Systems of Care leaders followed various strategies, including presentations and discussions at internal staff and interagency meetings,

and using newsletters, Web sites, and internal and external e-mail communication. Leaders also went into the community to share the initiative’s vision at community meetings and functions. As recommended in the literature on leadership (for example, Collins, Lowe & Arnett, 2000), leaders opted to communicate their messages regarding the new strategic direction multiple times through various channels.



Tip From the Field

Create a shared language. The Systems of Care initiative provided a set of guiding principles that stakeholders could use to create a shared language. Using the same words can enhance communication and collaboration among various players, while jargon and acronyms can confuse stakeholders. As Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 9) explain, “When people begin to use the same words with the same meaning, they communicate more effectively, minimize misunderstandings, and gain the sense of being on the same page, even while grappling with significant differences on issues.”

Step 4: Gain and Sustain Buy-In

Systems of Care leaders must spend time generating buy-in and support from agency staff, partners, youth and families, and community members. Their relationship building and communication skills are very important. Leaders recommended a participatory management style through which staff, interagency partners, and families feel comfortable approaching leaders directly with questions, concerns, or possible problems, and contributing to potential solutions.

Strategies for generating buy-in include soliciting feedback from people at all levels about the initiative’s vision and implementation, promoting the initiative at internal and external meetings, and hosting training sessions about the guiding principles. Joint training sessions among child welfare and partner agency staff were helpful not only as opportunities to learn about systems of care principles, but also for staff to learn about each other’s work and build a foundation

Exhibit 3: Strategic Plan Elements



– National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2007). Systems of Care: A Guide for Strategic Planning, p.12.

for collaborative efforts. In addition, Systems of Care project directors generated buy-in for the initiative by meeting one-on-one with staff members and other key stakeholders. The meetings resulted in staff and others recognizing the project directors’ passion and commitment to systems of care and feeling valued in the work.

Leaders emphasized the importance of finding champions of the initiative to help bring others on board with the vision. Internal champions help legitimize the initiative for agency staff, while external champions do the same for partners. As one Systems of Care director advised, “Until your system of care is in policy and practice, you need champions...Ask yourself who are the key people you need to make this work, and then go talk to them and help them see that they have a role in the system of care.”

“The leader should identify the right people to help bring the vision to life. These people can be internal or external to the organization, as long as they share a similar passion... Support from champions of the initiative will challenge resistance and help promote the vision.”

– *Systems of Care Project Director*



Tip From the Field

Involve supervisors and front line staff. Systems of Care leaders recognized that supervisors and frontline staff are the “lynch pins” for integrating systems of care principles into practice and enhancing services for children and families. One child welfare agency leader who spent a lot of time conducting “meet and greet” type meetings with supervisors explained that “very few things happen within the child welfare agency without supervisors influencing the work.”

Step 5: Empower Others to “Run With It”

Several leaders saw their role as starting the visioning and planning processes and then providing their staff and other stakeholders with the support and resources they needed to carry out the work. In most cases, leaders did not feel they needed to make every decision and solve every problem. In fact, it was quite the contrary. They allowed committees and subcommittees to tackle important issues, while providing support and encouragement to enable the work to take place. This approach empowered stakeholders and encouraged them to take ownership.

“[Our leader] made us feel like this is our plan as an organization, not just the leader’s plan.”

– *Systems of Care Stakeholder*



Tip From the Field



Recognize short-term successes. Recognizing successes and acknowledging people’s contributions to Systems of Care efforts can help keep stakeholders motivated, particularly when roadblocks and challenges arise.

Step 6: Revisit the Vision

Given that systems change is difficult and long-term work, and participants undergo peaks and valleys in terms of successful implementation, it is important that initiative leaders routinely return to the shared vision and re-emphasize the underlying purpose of building a system of care to help children and families. As explained by Heifetz and Linsky (2002, p.15), “To sustain momentum through a period of difficult change, you have to find ways to remind people of the orienting value—the positive vision—that makes the current angst worthwhile.”

Revisiting the vision will serve to reaffirm where the community is headed as well as its collective progress in getting there. Assessing and communicating progress will be easier when the community has identified specific goals and measurable objectives related to the vision.



Tip From the Field

Schedule time to reflect on the vision and assess progress toward achieving related goals. Annual conferences and strategic planning retreats can be valuable opportunities to assess whether activities are still on course, and to make needed modifications and plans for subsequent years. In addition, they can provide staff with validation of the work they have done and serve as a morale boost for continued efforts.

Conclusions

An essential early step in leading a Systems of Care initiative, or any systems change, is creating and communicating a clear vision. Leaders of systems change should dedicate considerable time to working with stakeholders to develop a shared vision for what they are working toward, and then communicate that vision over and over again through many different venues. Throughout the life of a Systems of Care initiative, leaders should continually solicit feedback to ensure consensus on the vision for change. In consultation with stakeholders, leaders should develop a strategic plan for implementing the vision, specifying clear goals, objectives, and strategies. The vision and strategic plan will then form a springboard to direct ongoing Systems of Care activities and provide motivation in overcoming the obstacles to success.

Shared Leadership: Multiple Roles in Creating and Communicating Vision

Representing a collaborative approach, also known as shared leadership, leadership structures within Systems of Care communities encompass both formal and informal leaders. Each type of leader can play an important role in creating and communicating a shared vision for the initiative:

- **Agency leaders.** Child welfare agency administrators and their interagency partners often set the tone for the Systems of Care initiative and contribute to development of the vision by aligning it with the various agencies' missions.
- **Project directors.** Systems of Care project directors are typically responsible for the day-to-day aspects of planning and implementing the initiative. As spokespersons for the initiative, they impart the vision to internal and external stakeholders. They oversee various activities that support achievement of goals and objectives related to the vision.
- **Managers and supervisors.** Champions within the child welfare agency help garner support for the vision among frontline staff, and help mitigate resistance to change.
- **Family and community members.** Families who were previously involved in the child welfare system, and other community members, take on informal leadership roles and provide important perspectives in defining a vision and devising strategies to achieve it.

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For More Information – Selected Resources on Creating and Communicating a Vision for Systems Change

Publications

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2010). *Leadership in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau. Available: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.

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Web Sites

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Systems of Care
www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/

Community Tool Box
Workgroup for Community Health and Development,
University of Kansas
Developing and Communicating a Vision
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1130.aspx

National Child Welfare Resource Center for
Organizational Improvement
Strategic Planning
<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/strategic.htm>

