Finish what you start: A study of Design Team change initiatives' impact on agency climate☆

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a multi-site longitudinal design to examine the effect of a Design Team intervention on organizational climate. Thirteen private, not-for-profit child welfare agencies from one state participated in a Design Team intervention to address workforce needs. A total of 407 workers from those agencies responded pre and post intervention to a survey that measures worker perceptions of the psychological climate of their organization using the Parker Psychological Climate Survey. Workers in organizations that completed the Design Team intervention had statistically significant increases in three of the four dimensions of the Parker scale. On the role dimension, significant change was noted on all three subscales on the interaction between Time 1 and Time 2 (ambiguity: $p = 0.012$; conflict: $p = 0.04$; overload: $p = 0.05$). On the organization dimension, the justice and support subscales had significant differences in the desired direction (justice: $p = 0.05$; support: $p = 0.03$). On the supervisor dimension, significant change was observed in the desired direction for both the goal emphasis and work facilitation subscales (goal emphasis: $p = 0.02$; work facilitation: $p = 0.00$). Statistically significant improvements in the organizational climates of child welfare agencies suggest the benefit of future research to test the effectiveness of Design Team interventions in other service areas. These findings build on intervention research with organizations by linking the ability of an organization to fully implement a change initiative to their capacity to improve the workplace climate for employees.

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1. Introduction and literature review

In recent years, research to address workforce issues in child welfare has focused on the organizational environment. Indeed, organizational environment can impact individual workers in measurable ways, including their commitment to their agency (Claiborne et al., 2011) and their intent to stay or leave their job (Claiborne, Auerbach, Zeitlin, & Lawrence, 2015; Strolin-Goltzman, 2010). Efforts to achieve desired levels of workforce effectiveness and stability thus include interventions to improve the organizational factors associated with workforce outcomes (Lawson et al., 2006; Potter, Comstock, Brittain, & Hanna, 2009). One such factor is the workplace climate, which is associated not only with workforce outcomes but also with an organization's readiness to change, its capacity to implement new initiatives, and outcomes for the families they serve.

Research on agency climate in the U.S. child welfare system is also part of understanding the broader scope of concerns present in the publically funded organizations charged with the safety, permanency and well-being of children. As laid out in Lipsky's dimensions of street-level bureaucracy in human service delivery (Lipsky, 2010), front-line workers negotiate a complex work environment. Their psychological experience of that work environment reflects challenges identified by Lipsky decades ago: street-level bureaucrats work with non-voluntary clients in systems with constant resource constraints (1980). Child welfare's frontline case managers witness deeply distressed families. At the same time, the services mandated and delivered through workers' case management efforts do not always meet the needs of children and families on their caseload. This dilemma of mandated high-needs clients, yet limited resources to effectively meet those needs, is the backdrop for U.S. child welfare workers on the front lines.

Despite these dilemmas, many workers remain committed to their job and persist in the field of child welfare (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellet, 2006). Yet far too many leave, and the departure of so many puts vulnerable children at further risk (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). If, however, the organizational climate of an agency is a support rather than a hindrance for front-line staff, it may contribute to employee effectiveness and retention. For child welfare agencies willing to make organizational level changes to

support workforce needs, can their efforts improve the climate for employees? To answer that question, this study explores the ability of the Design Team intervention to improve the psychological climate of an agency. The study also adds to the literature on organizational interventions by assessing the degree which agency Design Teams were able to implement change initiatives in their organization.

1.1. Psychological climate in child welfare agencies

The environment in which one works matters in many ways, from how one thinks about their job and professional identity to the type and frequency of organizational citizenship behaviors. In the field of child welfare, research continues to deepen our understanding of how organizational conditions and work environments impact the child welfare workforce, especially those who work directly with families. A particular focus is the psychological climate, defined broadly as employees' shared perception of their work environment's impact on workers' well-being (Glisson, 2002; James & James, 1989; Parker et al., 2003). While the experience of working in an agency is more than just the perceived psychological climate, it is nevertheless an important construct for understanding workforce outcomes such as turnover. Indeed, workers themselves identify a supportive organizational environment as important to retention (Johnco, Salloum, Olson, & Edwards, 2014).

Recent research indicates psychological climate affects workers' organizational commitment and their job status, including their decisions to stay or leave their job as well as their satisfaction with support from their supervisor, their workload and their salary (Claiborne et al., 2011; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Flower et al., 2005; Hopkins, Cohen-Callow, Kim, & Hwang, 2010). Organizational climate is furthermore associated with the ability of an agency to successfully implement new innovations (Claiborne, Auerbach, Lawrence, & Zeitlin Schudrich, 2013), including evidence-based practice models (Glisson, Green, & Williams, 2012). In other research, Glisson and colleagues found organizational climate is a significant predictor of service quality and is positively associated with improved youth outcomes in child welfare systems (Glisson & Green, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998).

1.2. Organizational interventions

With organizational climate tied to both workforce and service outcomes, several studies explore how organizational-level interventions can improve the agency environment. Research indicates that Glisson's ARC model can affect changes in organizational culture and climate that impact performance (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Other research shows the Design Team intervention supports positive organization-level factors that contribute to workforce stability. Quasi-experimental evaluations of this intervention show significant positive outcomes for worker intent to leave, actual turnover and other factors associated with workforce stability such as job satisfaction and burnout (Potter et al., 2009; Strolin-Goltzman, Lawrence, Auerbach, Caringi, Claiborne, Lawson, McCarthy, McGowan, Sherman & Shim, 2009).

The design team intervention is a facilitated approach to organizational change based on organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and the organizational development of a shared vision (Senge, 1990) as well as principles of action research and community of practice theory (Caringi, Strolin-Goltzman, Lawson, McCarthy, Briar-Lawson, & Claiborne, 2008). These theoretical principles provide the foundation of an intervention that strives to create coherency and unify practice within agencies by building a shared vision, fostering leadership across the agency, employing solution-based inquiry, focusing on team learning, and implementing solution-based decisions.

The Design Team intervention targets learning and development at the individual, group, and organizational level. During the intervention, organizations identify a change initiative related to organizational function rather than a change in service model or practice approach, and a Design Team of employees works with an external facilitator

to design and implement the change initiative. As a team of employees are empowered to propose and implement a change to how the organization functions, the Design Team intervention, in theory, may increase organizational change (Lewin, 1997).

Change in organizations, as in other social structures, requires not only a new idea or target for change, but also the implementation of that new idea. From public policy (i.e., Brodkin, 1990; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1980) to adopting evidence-based practice models (Barbee, Christensen, Antle, Wandersman, & Cahn, 2011; Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015), many fields of social science and areas of human service study the implementation of new rules, policies and practices. For the Design Team intervention, the degree to which the team is able to fully implement its change initiative is likely to impact workforce outcomes. Research suggests that agency Design Teams must work through multiple stages of an implementation process before a change initiative is fully embedded in the organization (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009).

2. Study methods

This research was conducted as part of a larger project funded by the U.S. Children's Bureau to address the comprehensive needs of the child welfare workforce. The study employed a multi-site longitudinal design to tests the effect of the Design Team intervention on agency climate while also assessing implementation completion of each Design Team's change initiative. Working with a statewide partner, project staff recruited thirteen private, not-for-profit child welfare agencies from one state to participate in a Design Team intervention to address workforce needs. All participating agencies had contracts with the state to provide a wide-range of child welfare services (e.g., prevention, foster care, residential, and community based services) and the sample included agencies serving urban, suburban, and rural communities. The Institutional Review Board of the Principle Investigators' home institution approved all components of the research project.

2.1. Data collection and sample

Employees at each participating agency were invited but not required to complete an on-site pen and paper survey at a "kick-off" event prior to the commencement of the intervention. Following baseline data collection, each agency initiated the Design Team intervention. For this study, the intervention followed established protocols for Design Teams (Lawrence, Zeitlin, Auerbach, & Claiborne, 2015). Each agency worked with an external facilitator for approximately 18 months through four phases of work to identify and implement a change initiative to address workforce needs at their organization. The facilitators for this project had graduate degrees as well as expertise and direct experience in organizational development. Facilitators met with the teams a minimum of four hours a month and participated in monthly calls with the Principal Investigator.

During the intervention, each Design Team facilitator submitted monthly reports to project researchers. These detailed reports use a structured, uniform format to capture Design Team agendas, meeting notes, and facilitator assessment of the team progress as they planned and implemented their organizational change initiatives. In addition, the design team completed a focus group at the end of the intervention. On the final day of the Design Team project, workers who had completed the baseline survey were asked to participate in the post-project survey.

2.2. Measures

The survey collected data on participant demographics and work-related questions including workers' role in the agency, their employment intentions and their perceptions of the psychological climate of the agencies. The scales used in this survey have been used extensively