

Building The Caring Enterprise

Part One: The Six Technologies of Service Integration

By John Franz

Stumbling towards integration

It's hard to integrate a community's human services. Oh, it had seemed a breeze when we first started to think about it. I mean, common sense tells you that if this family needs help from three or four different service systems, the people from those systems should just sit down together with the family and come up with a unified plan. No big deal, right? Wow, were we ever wrong. It wasn't that folks didn't want to work together – well, sometimes they didn't, but that was just personalities. Most of the time it was like they couldn't get the pieces to fit no matter how hard they tried. One system works one way – another system works another way. Someone says, "I have to do this first, and then this, or the paperwork won't go through." Someone else says, "I can't make that referral because they don't meet our criteria." A third person makes promises that sound good, but then quits her job a week later. The meetings go on forever and it's hard to tell who's more frustrated, the family or the social workers.

Now, it didn't always fall apart. Sometimes everything would click – new ideas would fly around the table, people would burst with energy, and life would change for families. Change dramatically. That's what made us want to keep trying. We knew we were on the right track, but something was still missing. How could we capture the sparkle of those special times and have it available, not just once and a while, but most of the time?

Saving worker X-25

Some old-timers told us we were trying too hard, that we should just accept that we couldn't be creative every time for every family. But we began to wonder if the problem was that we always had to step outside of our official jobs to make something special happen. You know, you have the way things are supposed to be done – protocol, paperwork, the mind-numbing stuff in that thick ring binder they gave you when you were hired that you always intended to read, but never did. And on the other hand, there's what you do that actually seems to help. Listening for the little things, getting someone involved who has been left out or forgotten, mining for hidden strengths, bringing a colleague from another agency to the table, or coming to the table yourself, even though you don't have to. There was always such a big divide between the mechanics and the soul of our work. Sometimes it seemed as if they had specifically designed the system to keep us from helping families.

So we wondered, was there some way we could redesign the mechanics of the system to line up better with what we wanted the system to do? Sure, we thought. We'll just change the job descriptions. "Okay," we said to worker X-25, "you are now supposed to be creative every day, instead of just once in a while." Well, that was a laugh. Because bureaucracy never sleeps, the attempt to change the job description rapidly devolved back to where worker X-25 not only had to do all the creative new stuff, but also everything from the old job as well – the big ring binder came back to haunt us. After about six months of that, worker X-25 usually went to look for a different job.

Back to the drawing board. Gradually we began to realize that if we wanted worker X-25 from this agency, and worker Y-44 from that agency to work together creatively, not only did we have to change their respective job descriptions, we also had to change the agencies that gave them their jobs and we had to change the system in which both those agencies operated. And that's when the fur really began to fly.

Change is good, as long as someone else is doing it

Having an insight, and doing something with that insight are two different things. We all know we could do things better in our personal lives. Maybe you've said something to yourself like, "If I just got up an hour earlier and practiced my yoga, I'd be so centered my work would be 100% better every day." Maybe you even went out and bought a cool yoga outfit and yoga mat. But then 5:30 am rolls around and, well, maybe yoga's not all it was cracked up to be.

If it's that hard for us to change, even after we buy a new outfit, imagine how hard it is for long standing agencies to redesign themselves and put those new designs into action. Organizational resistance to change makes our individual defensive routines look like shadow boxing.

The risks are high. If one agency changes and the others don't, maybe that one agency will be at a disadvantage and get put out of business. Folks who think the only cut throat competition is in the private business sector haven't been at a county board hearing when the various agencies are fighting for their share of the ever-dwindling human service budget. You change so that your agency is all nice and open and collaborative and the ones who don't change quickly suck you dry, taking all you have to give and not giving anything back.

So, we can't just change job descriptions, and we can't just have one agency or another change their operating approach. For a community to respond in an integrated and creative way when families have complex needs, the entire human service infrastructure of the community has to change to accommodate, support, guide and reinforce the transition from a competitive to a collaborative approach. At some point, if we're going to be serious about changing the way we do the business of helping, we're all going to have to agree to change at the same time – and we have to be able to make sure that no one has their fingers crossed behind their back when we do. We can't just buy the yoga outfit and the yoga mat, we actually have to restructure our day so we get up and do what we promised we would do.

The technologies of the caring enterprise

Our passion for helping drives us to improve our service systems. Without that passion any changes we make will be empty and lifeless. But by itself, that passion is not enough. To be effective over the long run, a caring enterprise has to be a careful combination of structure and soul. The mechanics of our systems must resonate with our vision and values. But here again we run into a problem. Visionaries rarely make good mechanics. They tend to overlook the details, let alone the politics, of change. We stand on one side of a great divide. They tell us how much better it's going to be on the other side. We get all excited about crossing over. We go running ahead to make that existential leap. But as we approach the edge, the other side begins to look pretty far away, and the canyon between the two cliffs looks really deep. Suddenly we think, "maybe it would be better if we built some sort of bridge, you know, for those folks who's legs aren't as strong as they used to be." And that's when we realize that while we need visionaries to help us see where we want to go, we also need engineers to help us get there.

A thousand details go into the operations of a human service agency. Those details increase geometrically when we look at the operation of a community's entire network of public and private service systems. To manage the process of change at a community level, we need a way of sorting the key details into manageable components, into what might be called the core technologies of the caring enterprise.

Six of these technologies seem especially important to the task of responding creatively and collaboratively when children and families have complex needs that span our usual service disciplines. Three of them are needed to drive the day-to-day operations of an integrated system of care, three others

work in the background to support each of those primary components. To be consistently effective, these technologies have to be implemented at every level of the enterprise: direct practice, internal operations at each agency, interagency relationships within the system of care, and in the way the community supports and manages all of its human service functions. These are the six:

The planning and action process. The first technology is the only one that children and families will see. It is our methodology for strength-based planning and action. We need to have a clear sense of the way the process works, who does what as part of the process, how it can be used to provide both immediate support and ongoing access to necessary resources, and how representatives from the various agencies involved with a given child and family should participate in the process. Anyone who is part of the enterprise should be on the same page with everyone else regarding the implementation of this core technology.

Staff development, support and supervision. To implement our process technology, we need a background component. Staff of the various agencies involved in the enterprise are not going to be on board if adequate pre-service and ongoing training is not available to help them understand and use the process, and informed support and supervision is not there to help them deal with the glitches, barriers and conundrums that arise as they implement the process over time.

Funding and resource access infrastructure. All the planning in the world is of little benefit if the plans cannot be put into effect. This brings us to the next front-end element of the enterprise: a reliable cross-system infrastructure to insure that the creative plans developed by each child and family team can be quickly and reliably implemented. Especially in larger communities, this is probably the most challenging of all of the technologies. Getting the right services to the right people at the right time and in the form most likely to be effective often requires a dramatic restructuring of the resource pool and a realignment of the funding streams that create this pool.

Interagency agreements, policies and contracts. The background technology needed to support this new infrastructure consists of all the policies, agreements and contracts that define the apparatus, procedures, rewards and consequences for the operation of the enterprise. This is where the politics get taken care of. The meetings where the nuts and bolts of the system of care are created can turn into battlefields as the passion of our vision confronts the realities of our individual and organizational defenses and the complexities of the redesign. The unsung heroes of organizational change are the lieutenants who slave away at these endless meetings through the frustrating process of give and take to fashion a new pattern that everyone involved can both understand and accept.

Information management. Our ability to manage our accounts and our accountability will make or break the ongoing operation of the enterprise. We must have a consistent information system for documenting our plans, their implementation, their funding and their impact. The bigger the enterprise, the more people it serves, the more sophisticated and important the information management component becomes. If the documentation and billing requirements do not reflect and reinforce the values of the helping process they will derail it.

Quality assurance and improvement. The front-end component of information management must be supported by an effective quality assurance and improvement system. Data from the documentation and billing process must feed back into our work at the practice, program, system, and community levels so that we can regularly compare what we are doing with what we would like to accomplish. There will always be a gap between our dreams and our realities, but we can make it smaller if we have a good mechanism for capturing information about system operations and analyzing it in the context of our values and goals.

Establishing a baseline for system integration

System integration is a long and complex process. Sometimes it is hard to tell where a community stands in its efforts to build a collaborative infrastructure. By breaking the task down into component parts it can be easier to visualize what has been accomplished to date and what still needs to be done. Table 1 is designed to help stakeholders in a community think about the degree to which they have implemented each of the core technologies of integration. The table presents targets or goals for implementation of each technology at the practice, program, system and community levels. Following the table is a simple rating scale a group of stakeholders might use to establish a baseline for each of the 24 system integration goals. The point is not to document what is wrong, but simply to begin thinking about possible next steps.

Table 1: Targets for Implementing the Core Technologies

	Practice	Program	System	Community
Unified, strength-based process for planning and action	Functional strengths are articulated & recorded for every family and form the basis for each team's action plan.	Agencies incorporate a strength-based approach in their planning, supervision and other operations.	Strengths are incorporated in system wide review processes and addressed in both overt and covert system mandates.	Community members regularly participate in child and family teams & community strengths are considered in system innovations.
Consistent staff development, support and supervision	Staff understand their duties, carry out their jobs competently, are rewarded for innovation and supported in making changes to improve personal and agency performance.	Each agency has a pre-service and in-service staff development system that is consistent with wraparound values. Supervisors and managers understand and support the model.	Frequent opportunities occur for formal and informal cross-training, cross-placement and blending of staff. Consistent training occurs throughout the service chain.	Family members, consumers and community members have input into training content, design and delivery.
Effective infrastructure for managing system funding, process implementation, and resource access	Child and family teams have access to the formal & informal monetary and non-monetary resources they need to develop and implement their plans of care.	Agencies see their roles as sharing resources, not guarding them. Supervisors from different agencies are able to work together across system boundaries to insure resource access for individual teams.	System managers consistently work to remove barriers to cooperation and combine their efforts to support the development of comprehensive resource pools.	The community understands, supports and participates in the management of the integrated system. Individual teams draw from community resources but also contribute toward community growth.

Explicit policies and contracts and interagency agreements that insure comprehensive, integrated assistance for families	Teams stay together even when significant changes in strategy are required to meet client or system needs.	Agencies have sufficient flexibility to change services to respond to alterations in client needs including ceasing certain activities in order to try other activities.	Inter-agency agreements insure consistency in helping relationships, despite service changes.	The community experiences an accountable and seamless system of care and is encouraged to invest in system customers.
Value-driven information management system for billing and documentation	Required documentation guides staff through appropriate planning steps and reinforces both process and values. Staff receive up-to-date data measured against operational values.	Each agency's internal and external reporting and billing systems are aligned with the core values.	Inter-agency agreements and policies simplify and coordinate reporting and documentation requirements.	Community is told what is happening, how dollars are being spent and what outcomes are being produced.
Coherent quality assurance and improvement system for increasing alignment with the core values of the system of care	Teams check to make sure that process and content are on target and whether planned actions have had their intended results from the point of view of consumers.	Agency accountability systems are based on measures of client participation, buy-in, satisfaction and outcomes.	Data on agency accountability for these elements is used for contract renewal and expansion, licensure and benchmarking.	Community participation and marketing programs build awareness of and support for responsive, client-driven services.

Establishing your system's baseline

This exercise is best carried out by a diverse group of community stakeholders. First, review the statements in each cell of the table and rewrite them to better capture the values and goals of your community's system. Next, each participant should record his or her sense of the current degree to which each value is being implemented, with a 1 indicating little or no development and a 5 indicating a high degree of implementation. Use a format like table 2, below, to record your impressions. Discuss your individual results in the group and develop a consensus around the specific components where next steps should be taken for continued system improvement. Use that consensus as the basis for developing a system action plan.

Table 2 - System Development Baseline

	Practice	Program	System	Community
Strength-based process	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Staff training and support	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Cross-system infrastructure	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

Policies, contracts and agreements	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Information management	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Quality assurance and improvement	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

Putting the core technologies into action

Each community will blend these technologies into a system of care in its own way, based on its unique history and balance of strengths and challenges. However, we have begun to see certain patterns develop in the basic structures that communities use to set up their caring enterprises. In some places, the lead public agencies join together and form an alliance that allows their respective staffs to work together to assist families, often through new offices where staff from multiple disciplines are co-located. In other places, the public agencies jointly contract with one or more large private agencies. The private agencies are then expected to provide a comprehensive blend of many types of assistance, based on individual plans of care developed with each child and family they serve. A few communities have formed integrated networks of providers linked through a common administrative hub. Lead agencies develop comprehensive plans of care with families that can then draw upon any of the other resources in the network for implementation. These three models and their many variations represent complementary strategies for implementing the core technologies of system integration.

The remaining articles in this four-part series will examine each of these approaches in more detail. Part two will look at the alliance model, part three the agency model, and part four the network approach. The articles will discuss each format’s advantages and disadvantages, suggest questions to be considered in design and implementation and identify factors that may favor one model over another in a given service environment.

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