Surviving and Thriving in Wraparound Land
Apollina Smith tries a different approach to staff development in her new county

By John Franz, Pat Miles and Neil Brown

The last time we heard from Apollina, in Zen and the Art of Wraparound, *interagency politics had forced our heroine out of her position as director of the Kenyon County Collaborative. She passed the torch to Carol Hartwig and took a job as a manager in Lake County – a place that had never even thought of trying the wraparound approach. In this article we pick up with her adventures a year later, and find out how she has fared in her new situation.*

Its not easy being green
"Out of place? Carol, I felt like Kermit the Frog on Mars! I was so far from my lily pad, I couldn't even remember what a lily pad was."

Carol and Apollina were meeting for lunch on neutral territory, Sally's House of Opera, a supper club run by an urban refugee in the middle of the orchard country between Kenyon and Lake Counties. Here you could enjoy a chicken Caesar salad in a booth with knotty pine paneling and an illuminated beer ad while an aria from La Boheme played softly in the background.

"But on the phone you said it was going great. What's the story?" Carol asked. Carol had reluctantly gone from being a top probation officer to managing the Collaborative when Apollina left.

"Yep, it is. Unbelievable, huh? But it took a while for me to realize I couldn't recreate Lake in Kenyon's image."

"Why not? We have a good system. It even works with me in charge."

"A good system for Kenyon. But the pieces weren't the same in Lake."

Carol took a sip of iced tea and shook her head at the pipe smoking fisherman landing his trout in the beer display.

"It shouldn't matter what the pieces are, should it? The question is how well you train and supervise your staff. That's what you told me."

Apollina took a mouthful of salad and smiled at the fisherman frozen in his moment of triumph.

"You know they don't make that brand any more? Sally drives all over the place hunting for these things in flea markets and antique shops. She thinks beer ads are the last great American art form. Anyway, I told you not to pay attention to anything I told you.

Training and supervising staff is always a good idea, but I didn't have Bob the wonder-facilitator and Carol his cagey big sister to work with. The learning curve was steep and my staff were at the bottom staring up, without much in the way of motivation to start the assent."

Sometimes the helpers need help
"So what did you do?"

"Basically, I quit trying to teach everybody myself, and I let them teach each other."

"Polly, you make my head hurt," Carol said while rubbing her temple with her fingertips. "You just told me that your staff didn't have a clue."

"See, I told you not to pay any attention to what I say. They didn't have a clue about wraparound, but they weren't stupid. They had their own ways of doing things, especially the front-line staff, but they kept any new ideas they had to themselves. The previous administrations had done their best to grind any semblance of flexibility and creativity out of them. So when I came in chattering about wraparound, it was just too big of a cultural shift. They'd learned the hard way not to do anything for management but keep their paperwork straight."

Carol finished her salad and turned around to give Sally a smile that the food was good, but now she needed coffee.

"Why did you stay? The place sounds horrible."

Apollina chatted with Sally for a moment while the coffee was being poured, then came back to the conversation with Carol.

"I was halfway out the door a couple of times. But then I took the time to pay attention to what the staff was actually doing, not what they were letting me know about. I started doing some shadowing and gradually folks opened up. They were sneaking creativity and interagency cooperation in when they thought no one was looking. I asked why they hadn't told me about some of the neat things they were doing before."

"Was it because they were afraid of you punishing them for coloring outside the lines?"

"I hope that's not your final answer. They could have cared less about me. From the day I arrived they had me pegged as a short-timer. No, it was the giant fear that haunts every human service bureaucracy."

"Liability?"

"Wrong again. You should have used a lifeline. When we poll the audience, we find out that 75% believe the biggest barrier is, ta da, paperwork. My staff were worried that if

anyone found out they were doing anything different, they would have to fill out more forms.”

“So you saved wraparound in Lake County by abolishing paperwork.”

“In a way. Actually, I just gave them a chance to get together and design their own paperwork, in exchange for becoming more creative and collaborative.”

The rise of the community of practice
Recently the attention in staff training and development research has begun to shift from a focus on how individuals acquire and use new skills to examining the way that groups of individuals interact to solve problems together. Several authors have begun to describe the natural formation of what have been called communities of practice, informal networks of staff in a particular discipline who quietly share insights, strategies and perspectives among one another frequently across divisional and even organizational boundaries.[1]

Practice communities within an organization are teams, but can be distinguished from many of the teams formed at most agencies. One of the characteristics of communities of practice is active learning. Staff in work units that are becoming communities of practice tend to acquire fewer skills through passive instruction and more from interaction with their colleagues. When managers and trainers take this perspective, attention shifts from an emphasis on individual learning to the acquisition of group competencies.[2]

A second difference is the way in which a community of practice forms and operates. A generic team is a group of people who are put together and told to perform a function or set of functions by following certain steps. In this formulation the team is essentially an assembly of individuals operating in parallel within a top-down management structure. A community of practice operates more autonomously, addressing challenges presented by management, but using its own problem-solving strategies.

It's not as easy as it looks
The idea of forming integrated, self-directed teams in private industry and human service agencies is not new. It has been tried often and it has failed many of the times it has been tried. (Even more frequently a group of people is called a team but continue to function

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[1] Most of the research in this area has been done in the context of private industry. Two learning theorists, Lave and Wenger, introduced the term community of practice in 1991. They defined the term as an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community. Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. The concept originally only applied to trans-organizational networks, but now is used to refer to internal communities of practice as well. Cf. Liedtka, Jeanne (199) “Linking competitive advantage with communities of practice.” *The Journal of Management Inquiry*, v. 8, n. 1, pp. 5-16.

[2] The point is not that passive learning (i.e. reading the manual) is dropped from the group's repetoire. Instead, the group consciously notes situations in which the preprogrammed approach provided by the manual won't work, and either extrapolates a workable variation or invents a new alternative.

as individuals.) Several factors have contributed to the problems of using true teams to support children and families with complex needs. First, while agencies may realign staff into different kinds of units and tell them to work as teams, important factors affecting staff behavior are not adjusted. Thus, while staff are expected to work as a team, the retention, compensation and advancement systems in the organization remain focused on individual accomplishment. Second, the organization may fail to realign operational processes and structures to take advantage of the benefits of service delivery by units of staff acting as a practice community and to compensate for its limitations. Third, the organization may expect staff to start operating as a team without providing the instruction, supervision and support necessary to make the transition from individually delivered services to support delivered through collaborative effort. Finally, even if organizations make adjustments in their reward structures and operational designs and offer reasonable training and support, they may not give staff and supervisors enough time and adequate pathways to move from the current model to the new approach.

If creating integrated teams that function as practice communities is so difficult, why bother? Because the potential benefits are so great. Once a unit has surmounted the learning curve and become a community of practice, they will be able to provide one another with greatly increased support and focus. The strength of their internal partnership will give them the capacity to form and sustain positive relationships with families and to work with those families to identify and address their most critical unmet needs.

Making lemonade

"When I was about ready to quit for the umpteenth time," Apollina said, "it occurred to me that I wasn't practicing what I was preaching. I wanted the staff to start using a strengths-based approach, but I wasn't being strength-based with them. All I could see was the negatives. I was experiencing them as resistant, back-stabbing, ornery, meanspirited, things like that. Of course that was how they wanted me to see them – the best defense is a good offense. I decided to start looking for the positives."

"It sounds like you wanted to do wraparound with your employees. That's novel."

"What else could I do? I'm a hopeless wrapper."

"So, you created a child and family team for each staff person?"

"No. That would have been coddling them. I wasn't in the mood for being nice. I started by looking at hidden strengths. I found quite a few, especially after I spent some time going out on calls and going to court with them. They cared about families and wanted to get good outcomes. They stuck around. Somehow the constant battles with management had forged them into a quiet self-sufficiency. The competency levels really varied, but there were some gems. They also had these hidden routines for getting things

done. They were real defensive about any sort of criticism, but were proud of what they had accomplished despite the adverse conditions."

"You make it sound pretty good," Carol said, watching as Apollina sketched out a strengths and needs chart on a napkin.

"That's why people hate strengths assessments. I was pretty angry at all they were doing to me, but here I was pulling up all these positives. It almost made me like them."

"So, what did you do?"

"Once I put the problem in wraparound terms, I realized I had the wrong goal. I had made my goal to get these people to use the wraparound approach. I like it a lot, but it's just a tool. The goal they shared with me was getting better outcomes for families. I had already jumped to a solution without bringing them through the process. They'd had four generations of leadership that had tried to impose dozens of solutions on them. Over time they had developed a strong natural resistance to other people's good ideas."

Building unit competency

Generally, organizational training programs are designed to improve the skills of individual staff. At the end of the program, each staff person in attendance receives his or her own certificate of accomplishment. However, for a work unit to become a community of practice, its members must learn how to learn together and then use that knowledge to redesign the context of their work. In most training programs, the trainer brings in a manual and teaches the staff how to use it. To develop unit-based competency, the team has to write their own manual. When a traditional workshop or training program is over, the each individual is awarded his or her certificate of accomplishment. At the end of a unit-based competency process, the team gets the certificate.

For this shift in focus from the individual to the team to be successful, the organization's approach must change. Helping people learn together means more than telling everyone to attend the same workshop. It means providing the support, autonomy and resources necessary for a group of people to come to understand themselves, each other and the work they do so thoroughly that they can rapidly adapt to new circumstances, use multiple tools effectively and cooperatively, and realign work load and work flow to take advantage of discovered opportunities or to resolve emerging challenges.

Some important benefits can flow to organizations if work units can be transformed into communities of practice. First, the teams should be able to obtain better outcomes for the clients of the organization. Second, not only can innovations be developed more quickly, they can also be diffused throughout the organization more easily, since the connections between staff are stronger. Third, staff should stay with the organization longer. The mutual support in a practice community should reduce staff burn out. Fourth, when staff

transitions do occur, the organization will no longer lose its training investment. All of the money spent on teaching staff new skills walks out the door with departing staff members when agencies focus their training on individuals. On the other hand, when service units learn together, the unit holds the core of knowledge collectively. Not only is less knowledge lost when staff move on, learning in the context of the practice community will bring replacements up to speed more quickly.

Another advantage is that as the team increases its ability to learn together, it can reduce its dependence on outside experts for insight and solutions. In a group learning process, every member takes responsibility for gathering information and bringing it back to the team. This can take place informally in ordinary conversation or peer-to-peer consultation. It can also be more formal. The team might hold mini-workshops in which members take turns bringing new ideas to the group. For example, one of the staff might read a book on a particular type of individual therapy, perhaps interview a practitioner, and then share what he or she has learned at the next meeting, putting this information into the context of the team's operations.

The good news about using unit-based competency as a focus for organizational development is that communities of practice already develop naturally in most agencies. Although researchers have just begun studying them, they have learned that the question is not "How do we make them happen?" Instead, we need to learn how to take advantage of the fact that they form whether we want them to or not. John Seely Brown, an executive at Xerox and one of the early investigators of this phenomenon, writes:

"Attempts to introduce 'teams' and 'work groups' into the workplace to enhance learning or work practice are often based on an assumption that without impetus from above, an organization's members configure themselves as individuals. In fact, people work and learn collaboratively and vital [communities of practice] are continually being formed and reformed."[3]

Learning how to learn together
In order to foster unit-based competency in an agency, new training methods are essential. Not only does the unit need to acquire skills together, the way those skills are presented and woven into practice must also be improved. What Seely Brown and others discovered by observing workers who were required to carry out complex tasks was that the bigger the manual, the more it was ignored by the best workers. Instead, when confronted with difficult challenges, the workers linked up with other people they trusted and talked through the situation from as many different perspectives as necessary until

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[3] Seely Brown is quoted in the new book by Peter Senge's group, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1999. The entire article by Seely Brown is available on line at http://www.parc.xerox.com/ops/members/brown/papers/orglearning.html. Other references include Wenger, Ettiene C., & William M. Snyder (2000) Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier, *Harvard Business Review*, c. 78, n. 1, pp. 130-145, and Gheradi, Silvia, & Davide Nicolini (2000) The Organizational Learning of Safety in Communities of Practice, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, v. 9, n. 1, pp. 7-18.

they could make sense out of what ever it was that they were confronting. Through this process of active learning, they created a collaborative solution set.

Active learning is generative, collaborative and situational. It is generative because instead of downloading a set of prepackaged skills into the brains of individual staff, the unit is instead presented with foundational concepts, challenges and goals. Their task is to translate basic principles into working knowledge by fashioning practical options for problem solving that make sense in the context of their day to day work. It is collaborative because they are asked to develop and implement these new skills together. Each member of the unit brings different strengths, experiences and perspectives to their common assignment of creating a workable practice model. It is situational, because the core principles are given meaning and substance through in vivo application in the unit's day to day work.

The final product of active learning is not a transfer of rote information, but the development of a competent, confident service unit.

The quid pro quo for teams who go through the rigorous efforts required to achieve unit-based competency is that they should no longer have to jump through all of the hoops in the canonical manual that usually structures much of the work in human service agencies. Becoming a community of practice demands increased, affirmative responsibility from a service unit. However, their accomplishments are rewarded with increased autonomy and easier access to resources. This will allow them to respond more effectively and creatively to the complex needs of children and families.

Beginning the transition

"So, you turned Lake County around by handing over the reins of power to those who were out to destroy you? Isn't that capitulation? What if one of your competency units decided the best way of handling things was to take an extra week of vacation, or stop showing up in court?"

"Well, Carol, you know things always sound smoother in the telling. The staff weren't all that homogeneous. The only thing that united them was their distrust of me. So not everyone wanted to be on teams. And we didn't need teams for a lot of the jobs in the agency. I had some good lone rangers who could take care of business on their own. There were also enough foot soldiers who just wanted to be told what they were supposed to do, and be acknowledged when they did it well. I put out an open invitation for 6 staff and one supervisor who wanted to form a complex solutions unit. I decided to get rid of labels like permanency planning units, or special needs units and concentrate on the products I really wanted – fresh ideas and getting things done. I had to do some recruiting behind the scenes to get things rolling, but I actually had twelve applicants for the 7 positions. I couldn't offer any change in pay and the only assurance was that they would have to work harder."

"What if it didn't work out? Were they out of a job?"

"No. I wanted them to try it for six months. If they didn't like it, they could disband, or leave the team and go back to their old job. I pulled them together and explained that they were basically support to the rest of the office. Anyone else could propose that the CS unit should come in and help develop new options with families. As an agency, we looked at the overall case load/work load distribution and we found that about 5% child and family situations that were taking up about 30 or 40% of everyone's time. The creative solutions unit would be an adjunct, taking on the primary responsibility for assistance, but operating in cooperation with the original assigned worker. Their job was to make everyone else's job easier by figuring out new and better ways of helping families."

"I gave them two months with reduced case loads. During that time, their job was to write their own manual. I let them audition several consultants and they picked one to help them with the job. It took them 4 months to write the manual, but at six months they were cooking. And by being adjuncts, rather than an isolated dumping ground, they began developing a solid network both inside and outside the agency. We've had requests to let them act as adjuncts to some of the other agencies. Politically, it seemed like a breakthrough, but I passed the request on to the team. Their answer was interesting: 'It's a good idea, just not for us. But we will help them start their own creative solutions unit.'"

Carol wrestled briefly with Apollina for the check, then let her take it.

"So, all in all, it's beginning to look a lot like wraparound."

"Kind of. But recreated in their own image."

"Is your job any easier?"

"Oh God, no! I keep having to carve out space for them to operate differently. There is all sorts of entropy pulling them back toward the old way of acting. And I had to incentivize the primary contact people as well as special services so that every family didn't require complex solutions."

"Sounds pretty rosy."

"Next month at lunch I'll tell you about the people who are trying to get me fired."

"No, next month you have to help me figure out what to do about the counter-revolution in my old probation department."