# Taming the Wraparound Gremlins
Overcoming Operational Barriers to Creative Assistance for Families

By John Franz, Patricia Miles and Neil Brown

**Sometimes we just get stuck**
Implementing wraparound is not easy.  We all get stuck at times.  Sometimes the answer is to step back and look at the process from a different perspective.  When we do, roadblocks we didn't even know existed may become evident.  A variety of unconscious habits and attitudes may prevent even the most well-intentioned staff, agencies and systems from incorporating and sustaining the values of the wraparound approach.  The goal of this article is to describe some of the difficulties wraparound implementers are encountering and suggest strategies for overcoming them.  The intent is not to tell people what they are doing wrong, but to identify some of the gremlins that can derail our best efforts.  Naming these pesky obstacles won't necessarily make them go away, but it can provide us with an opportunity to put countermeasures in place.

We have selected six process demons to discuss in this article.  We welcome responses and suggestions from readers about other frustrating patterns and how you've dealt with them.  Similarly, the strategies we propose aren't the only responses.  They are just our way of starting the conversation.  Our nominees for the wraparound roadblock hall of fame are:

- Accepting a false consensus,
- Relying on slot-based solutions,
- Operating competing collaboratives
- Succumbing to the myth of beneficence,
- Getting trapped in the crisis cycle, and
- Substituting process for action.

All of these obstructions can occur at the practice, program and system levels, and any of them can evolve from the best intentions of individuals, teams and agencies.  This month we'll look at the first two.  We'll deal with the rest in upcoming issues of the Journal.  In the meantime, we're interested in hearing your suggestions and ideas about what to do when wraparound isn't working.  You can reach us through email at info@paperboat.com.  We'll pass along your ideas and comments in subsequent articles.

**What is wraparound, and why is it so hard to do?**
The easiest way to tell if you are actually doing wraparound is to check everyone's pulse rates.  If staff and managers are calm, focused and generally comfortable with their work, it probably isn't wraparound.  If people are cycling between long bouts of frustration and brief episodes of unexpected joy, you may be on the right track.[1]

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[1] Earlier Journal articles have described wraparound in detail.  Regular readers may have followed the exploits of Apollina Smith as she attempted to transform Kenyon County's approach to supporting families with children who have complex needs.  A recent Council publication, *The Secret of the Card Shop Caper,* is a teaching story that recounts the adventures of a child and family team that uses the wraparound approach when a child with a severe

Wraparound combines reflective discovery and direct action – learning by doing.  Its hallmark is a sustained, creative response to a child and family's unmet needs by a group of people who form a collaborative circle of support.  If the end result of a child and family team meeting is a referral to an existing service that could have been accessed more quickly and simply through a case manager, a conversation may have occurred, but it isn't what we think of as wraparound.  Wraparound is what we do when we want to do better, and how we get it done together.

Our actions may be as simple as helping a family remodel a bedroom to make it a safe place for a child with special needs, or as complex as helping a clinician resolve a difficult diagnosis through a wide range of observations and interventions.  They may require sophisticated technology, as in using computer-aided biometrics to help a child identify and ameliorate uncontrolled rage responses, or simple skill building, as in teaching a young man the proper way to ask a girl for a date.

When it works, the wraparound approach can help us help families make amazing turnarounds.  When it doesn't work, or worse, when it stops working, wraparound can also be incredibly frustrating.  One of our colleagues, John Whitbeck, has commented that "When we get close to making a difference, the system heals over and we fall back to doing things the same old way."  Two of the more prevalent mechanisms behind this tendency toward organizational regression are accepting a false consensus and succumbing to slot-based solutions.

**Accepting a false consensus**
A false consensus is when we act like we agree with one another, but we really don't.  At the practice level, this happens when a child and family team selects a plan of action and all of the members of the team say they agree, but one or more are holding back.  For example, a team for a child who's on probation may develop a plan for a series of social and recreational interventions, focusing on the child's lack of appropriate peers.  The probation officer sits through the planning and seems to be in agreement, but at the last moment announces that the team can do what it wants, but that he is going to have to impose a forty day detention as a necessary consequence.  When asked why he didn't say something sooner, the officer replies, "I didn't want to interfere, you were all working so hard."

At the program level, a false consensus may arise between staff selected to implement the wraparound approach and their supervisors and managers.  The staff may be told to use wraparound at the same time that the administration imposes protocols that require staff to follow traditional methodologies.  At the system level, an interagency team might appear to have a consensus in an agreement to share resources, but the bottom drops out when one of the partners is faced with a fair hearing order requiring them to put a child in an expensive care facility.

A false consensus can form accidentally or intentionally and can be one-sided or two sided.  A two-sided accidental false consensus develops when everyone in the group believes they have an agreement, but its weakness is exposed when its terms are tested in practice.  A one-sided false

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emotional disorder is also deeply involved in the juvenile justice system.  Back issues of the Journal can be found on line at http://paperboat.com.  Click on the "Calliope" tab. *The Card Shop Caper* can be ordered by calling the Council at 608-284-0580.

consensus occurs when one or more of the parties holds back and, for good reasons or ill, fails to disclose that they have their fingers crossed behind their backs. A two-sided situation arises when everyone chooses to act like they agree, even when everyone knows they don't. This might occur when the group wants to get a federal grant that requires an interagency agreement. It can also happen because no one wants to appear ill mannered in public. It might even arise when people are tired of meeting and pretend to agree just to get out of the room.

The attributes of false consensus are the standard fare of most human interaction: private complaints after public compliments, contradictory messages from key stakeholders, little conspiracies to bypass or subvert the open process of the meeting. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (top organizational development theorists from Harvard and MIT, respectively) point out this fact of life in their book, *Organizational Learning II, Theory, Method and Practice*.[2] These patterns of individual and organizational defensiveness emerge whenever human beings deal with issues that are embarrassing or threatening. The challenge is to get groups to move from a base line, which they call "Model I" thinking, to more effective, "Model II" interactions. To make this leap, they say that we have to create new learning systems in our organizations. The governing variables of these new systems are "valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment." The behavioral strategies of Model II systems involve sharing power with anyone who has competence and is relevant to deciding about implementing the action in question." A group using Model II learning seeks "to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group is to maximize the contributions of each member." Wraparound works when a team functions in the Model II mode.

**Avoiding and overcoming the false consensus**
In his book, *No More Teams*, Michael Schrage examines the difference between true collaboration and artificial teamwork.[3] He points out that when people try to substitute increased communication for increased collaboration, they learn the hard way that there is a big difference. "Creating a shared understanding is simply a different task than exchanging information," he notes. Too often, our teams are simply used as tools for the one way transmission of information rather than a means for creating a common purpose among people with diverse perspectives.

Schrage defines collaboration as the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a common understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. "The thing all great collaborative efforts have in common is people who realized that they couldn't do it all by themselves."

Two of the strategies he offers for preventing or overcoming a false consensus are:
- making sure that everyone has the opportunity and support needed to accurately present their perspective to the group, and,
- inspiring a group of individuals to agree to pursue a common mission despite their differences in perspective.

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[2] New York: Addison-Wesley (1996)
[3] Schrage, Michael. *No More Teams*. New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1995.

In the wraparound approach, the goal of a child and family team is not to have everyone be friends, although it is wonderful if that happens. The purpose is to help a child and family with complex needs lead better lives by inventing new strategies for assistance. Preventing a false consensus from derailing this effort starts with establishing an atmosphere that makes room for sharing insights and observations without destroying the common effort. The person or people facilitating the wraparound process build this atmosphere before the first meeting occurs through the way each individual is invited to participate and oriented to what will be happening. Several important messages must be transmitted: we're getting together to figure out a new way of helping; we need your insights and you may be asked to do things differently than is your habit; we're going to listen to everyone's ideas, but ultimately we are going to act as a team; and, being part of a wraparound team will mean working together over the long haul because we are going to keep trying new ideas together until we come up with options that work.

These themes have to be reinforced at every meeting and in every interaction outside of the meetings. This is especially true when people try to get the real work of helping the child and family done away from the meeting. Members will present issues to the facilitator and expect to have them taken care of on the side. Unless they're careful, facilitators in these situations can find themselves trapped in multiple lines of miscommunication. (This is different from team members working individually or in small groups to carry out various tasks in the family's action plan.) If it does happen, the issue should be brought back to the team.

Wraparound works when we create environments at the family, program and community levels that provide enough security, honesty, commitment and guidance for us to hold back against the natural tendency to fall into our habitual defensive patterns and routines.

**Slot-based Solutions**

The second barrier to effective wraparound emerges when the group or some of its key members lock in on a strategy too soon. This has been called the "ready, shoot, aim" syndrome, where we use a complex analytical process to justify decisions we have already made. Charles Glisson and his associates documented just how resolute this tendency can be in a study they conducted in Tennessee. The state of Tennessee had developed autonomous collaborative case management teams called Assessment and Care Coordination Teams (ACCTs) and charged them with developing written, individualized plans of care when children entered state custody. These plans often included recommendations regarding mental health services and residential placement. The goal was not necessarily to reduce the use of these resources, but to improve the match between needs and services for each child and his or her family. To do this, Tennessee not only created a special planning process but also provided extensive training on the use of mental health assessment tools and developed a decision-tree to help staff match assessment findings with resource options.[4]

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[4] Martin, L.M., Peters, C.L., and C. Glisson, (1998) "Factors Affecting Case Management Recommendations for Children Entering State Custody," *The Social Service Review*, v. 72, n. 4, pp. 521-544.

This structure and process was created in response to earlier findings that documented the entrenched nature and negative impact of slot-based decision-making in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The authors describe the problem this way:

"Case managers base important placement and service decisions on the labels that have been previously attached to children. The labels tend to fall into two categories: those that result from reports about the child's previous behavior (e.g. substance abuser, sex offender) and labels that result from reports about their parents' previous behavior (e.g. physical abuse, sexual abuse, child of substance abusers). When a child has been labeled, the label becomes a useful, if not optimal, rationale for case managers who must make critical decisions about the child with limited information. However, service suffers when such labels are used as the primary basis for placement and service recommendation. For example, studies have documented that when parents and professionals are told that a child is a "substance abuser" they tend to view that child more negatively in a way that influences subsequent conclusions and recommendations."[5]

The impact of the tendency to use labels is so strong that the studies cited by Glisson show that "psychosocial profiles either play no role or play a very weak role in predicting actual placements and services." In fact, "several studies have found that the primary determinants of placements and services to be simply age and gender." In response, Glisson and his associates developed a large scale study to determine whether better training and structure could improve the quality of case manager recommendations and the fit between those recommendations and the services and placements children actually receive. One hundred case managers in 5 of Tennessee's ACCT's were trained to conduct and interpret psychosocial assessments and required to conduct the assessments for each child at intake. The study ran for 2 years and included 633 children, all under juvenile court jurisdiction. The disappointing results showed that despite all of their training and support, "case managers based their recommendations less on the psychosocial profiles of the children [that they themselves had completed] than on the labels attached to each child at the time the child entered custody and on the pathways of service established by judicial determinations."[6]

At the end of the article, Glisson and his associates ask themselves why case managers, even when they are extensively trained and supported, do not use the results of their planning in their service recommendations. This is the answer they propose:

"Our belief is that case managers are reluctant to deviate from their customary practices and what they believe are tried and true methods of decision making because these practices and methods are supported by the culture and climate of their work environments. The culture and climate of these work environments perpetuate the use of rules of thumb and implicit theories regarding children…. The use of new assessment strategies, therefore, depends on the development of new norms, values

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[5] Ibid, citing several studies, including Glasberg, L.A., (1994) "Students with Behavioral Disorders:Determinants of Placement Outcomes," *Behavioral Disorders* , v. 19, n. 3, pp. 181-191, and Glission, Charles, (1996) "Judicial and Service Decisions for Children Entering State Custody: The Limited Role of Mental Health," *Social Service Review*, v. 70, n. 2.

[6] Martin, et al., note 3

and perceptions in the culture and climate of the service system before these new strategies will be adopted."[7]

The implementation of the wraparound approach is our attempt to make these fundamental changes in culture and climate. But the work of Glisson and his colleagues show just how strong the slots are that guide most human service decision-making. They are like deep ruts that keep the wagons of children's lives going in the wrong direction, no matter how strongly we try to steer a better course. Much effort is needed to get out of these ruts, especially when children and their parents carry significant labels as part of their life's baggage.

**Getting back on course**

Slot-based solutions happen when habit speaks louder than reason. We do it all the time. At the practice level, we might get nervous at a child and family team meeting, abandon the strengths, goals and needs we have carefully identified and prioritized and jump back into the rut by choosing as our action a referral to a standard day treatment program – even though the child doesn't really fit. However, since it was there, it feels like a safer choice. At the program level, our agency might decide to put most of its resources into standard practices, even though our mission and strategic plan point in new directions. We're afraid of going out of business if we don't keep offering the same products – regardless of their effectiveness. At the community level, our inter-agency consortium might dream of creating a seamless network so that families can receive integrated support across systems, but we shy away from expanding the network beyond the pilot stage. We just don't get along well enough with one another to be that open.

To get out of the rut we must create and sustain a culture that rewards results. To do this at the practice level, we must challenge the hidden assumption that the first plan has to be perfect. The child and family team is a learning enterprise. The way we learn is to try something, see what works and what doesn't, then try something else based on what we've discovered. This means that we have to shift the service culture from an incident driven model to one that focuses on history and sequence. To be a learning enterprise – to get out of the rut – we have to be alert for unexpected connections and patterns in life experiences, and the impact of changing contexts on critical behaviors. Then we need the confidence and skill to use these observations as the cornerstone of the services and supports that we select. Of course, to take advantage of these insights, we must also put flexible resources on the table so that each child and family team can design and implement its own system of support, and change it as often as need be to establish a plan that works. Finally, we need to reward teams for trying new things, even when the result is less than optimal.

At the program level, the issue becomes how do we create an atmosphere that allows staff to get themselves out of these deep ruts and to stay out of them. Edgar Schein, who has written extensively on changing organizational culture, says that the only way to do this is to change the explicit and the hidden incentives for staying in the ruts. If we change expectations, but leave the

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[7] Ibid.

"reward system, the control system, the accountability system and the career system alone … leaders should not be surprised that teamwork is undermined and subverted."[8]  Organizations that have decided to commit themselves to creative, collaborative support for children and families find that they have to hire differently, supervise differently, pay differently and give staff new ways to demonstrate their competence.  What should be rewarded?  Imagine a supervisor meeting with a new staff person for the six-month review.  What if at that meeting, the supervisor's first question is, "Tell me about the new ideas you've come up with?"  The next question might be, "Tell me about your Rolodex.  Who have you connected with?"  These questions are aligned with the mission of an organization focusing on creative collaboration.  A third question might be: "What have families needed, and how did you help them get it?"  A final question could be, "How can I help you do something new and different for families during the next six months?"

A complex blend of leadership seems to be an important part of avoiding slot-based solutions at the community level.  In places that are making significant strides in wraparound implementation, we often observe three types of leaders working together.  A value speaker is necessary to keep the inter-agency group on track with its vision.  This type of leader operates as a modern day prophet, constantly staying on message, often to the dismay and irritation of those who just want to get the job done.  The second type of leader is the empowered pragmatist, someone who knows how the system operates, has survived its vicissitudes, and is committed to making something new happen.  The third is the dedicated implementer.  Where wraparound has gotten off the ground, there have always been people who put their lives and careers on the line to make it happen consistently for children and families.  Synergy and sparks fly when these three interact.  The value speaker keeps the enterprise on track, the pragmatist pulls the strings and makes the deals to keep it running and the implementer pushes the wagon.  They frequently disagree, but their common vision keeps them together, and helps them pull each other out of the ruts.

**Until next time**
We will examine more of the roadblocks in the next issue of the Journal.  In the meantime, we want to emphasize that there is no one best way to tame the wraparound gremlins.  In every community the circumstances, personalities, opportunities and politics are going to be different.  All we can do is to try to improve our ability to smoke out the hidden impediments (or the invisible factors behind the obvious problems) and find a point of leverage for making things better.

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[8] Schein, Edgar (1992) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.  San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.