The Return of the Wraparound Gremlins

Dealing with more of the barriers to effective integration of strength-based service and support

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In last month's article, we presented the challenge of the wraparound gremlins, six process demons that can sabotage a community's best efforts to provide integrated, strength-based support for families with children who have complex and enduring needs. The first article described two of the gremlins: accepting a false consensus and relying on slot-based solutions. This article will take on two more of these pesky imps: operating competing collaboratives and succumbing to the myth of beneficence.

Collaborative collisions

Collaboration has become a watchword across the human service disciplines, driven by a desire for improved outcomes and responsiveness, and the pressure to do "more with less". This has resulted in multiple collaborative initiatives attempting to co-exist in many communities. Frequently these initiatives espouse similar values: improved coordination, individualization and flexibility in services and a stronger voice for service recipients. In addition, they often share overlapping membership. Nonetheless, each collaborative develops its own tone, shape, language and culture, and each competes with the others for jurisdiction and resources, especially that scarcest of commodities, the time of direct care, supervisory and administrative staff.

Collaborative battles at the practice, program and system levels

At the practice level, competing collaboratives can result in "multiple initiative disorder." A family with several members who have complex needs might experience inclusion efforts authored by the schools, family decision meetings through the child welfare system, assertive community treatment via mental health organizations, and community-based restorative justice from the court system. Each of these may create expectations that service providers and family members engage in some form of joint, collaborative effort. This can lead to confusion, endless meetings and contradictory plans. As a result, the effort each agency in a community pours into creating its own collaborative may inadvertently reduce the net amount of time that line staff of these agencies have for working together with families.

At the program level, the presence of competing collaboratives leaves managers facing difficult choices about where to put their time and energy. Confronted by multiple meetings for multiple initiatives it is difficult to sort out the merely urgent from the truly important. Managers are often asked to carry ambiguous messages to the staff they supervise about how to participate in the various initiatives. Interpreting these contradictory directives and translating them into action puts managers in the position of fostering fragmentation, even though the results contradict the core values behind each collaborative effort.

At the system level, collaborative competition can result in several challenges. First, executive behavior may mirror that described above for unit managers – their attempts to create and interpret different collaboratives can divide community participation rather than unite it. Second, administrators mandated to launch various collaboratives while struggling to conserve a finite pool of resources may be forced into maneuvers designed to secure the best position for their agency, as

opposed to the best overall arrangement for the community service system. Third, the politics of collaborative conflict may distract leaders from the important work of fostering the growth of a shared community vision.

Charles Glisson and his colleagues at the University of Tennessee documented the negative impact of collaborative conflict in a challenging study published in 1998. The state of Tennessee had created an innovative pilot program in 12 counties to improve children's services by reconfiguring the interorganizational mechanisms used to coordinate services. The program created autonomous case management teams to coordinate services from multiple systems for children entering state custody. Glisson matched the 12 pilot counties with 12 controls and studied both the process and its impact on children's psychosocial functioning. Instead of helping, the attempt to increase coordination was found to have a negative impact on functioning. In discussing the results of their research, the authors observe that: "The more pronounced and visible the role of a services coordination team in a given area, the less responsibility caseworkers in the area assumed for the activities associated with the indicators of services quality, regardless of the needs of specific children…. By transferring key decisions to those who do not work directly with a child, personal responsibility for the child is reduced for those who do. The important point is that this reduction in personal responsibility for the child is not complemented by a comparable assumption of responsibility by service coordination teams."[1]

Avoiding collaborative dissonance
In the face of this frustration, the first impulse is to retreat to our respective agencies, build higher fences and deliver our jealously guarded individual services from within a siege mentality. But we've already been there and we know that doesn't work. The real learning is that in our first attempts to leave our enclaves, we inadvertently brought them along with us and transplanted them into the collaborative arena.

At the child and family level it is critical that we reflect on Glisson's observation and make sure that the key decision-makers are family members and those who are in a direct helping relationship with the family. In addition, we must simplify documentation and operate with a single shared process and not an ungainly amalgam of multiple, redundant and contradictory protocols. At the program level it is important for managers to develop and communicate to their staff an understanding of how the different initiatives in the community relate to each other. It is even more important for managers to identify opportunities for synthesizing competing collaboratives rather than falling into the trap of forced prioritization, in which we must choose which collaborative to join or at least decide which one will get our time this week. At the system level, the challenge for agency administrators and community leaders is to create a shared space for honest conversation and understanding that will permit a common vision, direction and set of operational processes to emerge.

Creating a context for cooperation
Communities that have experienced competing collaboratives are beginning to take a second run at this effort, using what they have learned, and, in many cases, rediscovering basic facts and values they already knew but may have forgotten. This is a sort of peacemaking, quelling the fires that

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[1] Glisson, Charles and Anthony Hemmelgarn (1998). The effects of organizational climate and interorganizational coordination on the quality and outcomes of children's service systems. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, v. 22, n 5, pp 404 – 421, at p. 417.

arose when the first phase collaboratives collided. What seems to help this reconciliation is getting in touch with the values that drew us all into this business in the first place. One expression of the spirit needed to bring us back together comes from Jean Vanier, a co-founder of the L'Arche communities. He offers six simple points to guide us:

- Respect every individual human being
- Create space for people to grow and become mature
- Always stay in dialog
- Keep adapting mutual expectations
- Enjoy the differences among people
- Always direct your attentions to those who suffer most[2]

Creating a context for success
Forming effective heterogeneous coalitions, especially those in which there are large power, resource and cultural differentials, is a difficult task. It requires a conscious understanding and acceptance of what everyone is able and willing to bring to the table and what they have to take back home. Terry Mizrahi, a professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work of the City University of New York, and the director of the Education Center for Community Organizing, defines collaboration as the process that occurs when "representatives of different organizations come together for a common purpose while reconciling difference in power, commitment, contributions, ideology, race, class, gender, age, professional background, skill and resources." [3] She tells collaboration leaders that one of the keys to success is figuring out "what can the collaboration obtain from its members and what can [it] give to collaboration participants to sustain their commitment and contributions."

Change lessons
At all three operational levels there are lessons to be learned that will help us to better harness collaborative efficiency. These lessons include: recognizing that collaborative efforts require time to build; always focusing on the positive and the possible; and developing and using skills in negotiation, trade off, and compromise.

Time. There is no short cut to building an effective community-based response at the practice, program, and system levels. Just as we know that wraparound teams need to meet regularly to develop and manage a creative support plan, so too must collaborative representatives from program management and system administration create safe haven forums where they can take the time to objectively discuss the current collaboratives and begin to define opportunities where they overlap and compliment one another.

Positive focus. Too often the wraparound process gets side-tracked by yes-butting, trash-talking and the tendency to run down whoever isn't in the room. Trapped in the negative force fields of stalled collaboratives, we find ourselves spinning tales of doom and gloom. Leaders at all levels (child and

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[2] Vanier's suggestions are quoted by Henri Nouwen in his book *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*, New York: Doubleday, 1988, p. 179. L'Arche is dedicated to placing people with the greatest need at the center of the community, an inversion of modern society's tendency to marginalize those who have significant handicaps.

[3] Mizrahi, Terry (1999) "Strategies for effective collaborations in the human services," *Social Policy*, v. 29, n. 4, pp. 5-20.

family team facilitators, unit supervisors, agency administrators, family members and community stakeholders) must face the challenge of keeping everyone's hope-o-meter in the green.[4] Community initiatives often fail due to the absence of one or more persons willing to carry this torch.

The art of the deal. In order to move beyond competing initiatives, community partners will need skills in discovering what they can negotiate, when they can trade off, and where they can compromise. To do this they will need to be clear about what they bring to the enterprise, clear about the boundaries they are pushing against, and clear about the limits of their own flexibility. Relationships are the key to successful collaboration – only in an on-going relationship can partners effectively find solutions that balance process and product. At first this is done by trial and error, usually through smaller trust transactions, but over time participants develop a sense of the art of this balancing.

Mizrahi believes that to really take advantage of these lessons an enabler/facilitator role is needed for the collaboration to progress and should be built into the collaborative work plan, separate from, and in addition to, the staff needed to meet specific project goals.

Succumbing to the Myth of Beneficence

The myth of beneficence is the willingness to operate with the untested assumption that because we are acting with good intentions we will produce good results. The inquiry by Charles Glisson and his colleagues described above is an example of challenging the myth of beneficence. Glisson's research was remarkable in several aspects: first, he was willing to test the connection between process and product in human services; second, he examined not only fidelity to the process, but collateral factors impinging on the implementation and execution of the process; third, he made a sincere effort to learn from what he saw. Glisson tested the reality of implementation, as well as the project's results. He found that team members were poorly trained, and that the people who were primarily involved in supporting the child and family weren't part of the effort.[5]

To escape the myth of beneficence, we need information about what we are doing and the impact it is having on the people we trying to help. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Peter Senge and his colleagues point out that "assessing the success of innovative practices is an inherently complex and ambiguous challenge in sustaining profound change – indeed, one of the most fundamental challenges."[6] They suggest several strategies for meeting this challenge:

Appreciate the time delays that are involved with profound change
("Don't judge the ultimate success or failure of your efforts based only on the early results…Managers always want to pull up the radishes to see how they're growing."

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[4] Thanks to Maurite Davis and Peggy Younglove, parent advocates in Clackamas County, Oregon and their partners at the Oregon Family Support Network for creating the concept of the hope-o-meter.

[5] Chris Meyer and Rick Ross have a wonderfully simple definition of a team: "all of the people who need one another to accomplish a task." Meyer, C. & Ross, R. (1999) "Performance Dashboards" in Senge, Peter, et. al., *The Dance of Change.* New York: Currency/Doubleday.

[6] Senge, *ibid*, p. 282. This quote comes from a thoughtful chapter on assessment and measurement that would be of great assistance to anyone attempting to design a new metric for any innovative enterprise. Only a few of the many useful suggestions and insights from the chapter can be referenced in this short article.

Build partnership with executive leaders around assessing the assessment process
("Conventional measurements represent a 'trap' that can kill change and learning initiatives by requiring them to report their results in a way that hamstrings future innovation…. At its heart this challenge calls for changing (or at least questioning) the way that traditional metrics are gathered, interpreted, and used.")

Learn to recognize and appreciate progress as it occurs
("One of the most important tasks for any leader of change is to help people feel that they are really making progress." This can be done by establishing interim goals that can help people gauge progress along the way, keeping an eye out for, and celebrating unanticipated accomplishments, and keeping a record over time in the shifts in peoples' views as they participate in the change effort.)

Make assessment, and developing new abilities to assess, a priority among advocates of change
("Learning to assess the consequences of significant change initiatives is a complex new territory, often neglected by leaders of those initiatives…. The key shift is to bring measurement and assessment into the service of learners, rather than have if feared as a tool for outside evaluators.")

Surmounting the myth of beneficence means attacking the question of whether what we're doing is doing any good from both the perspectives of the process and the product. Thus, we must improve our ability to design our service planning and delivery process to make it easy for child and family teams to identify and correct problems as they occur, and to make the operations of our system infrastructure inherently measurable. That will begin to address the question of process at the practice program and system levels. At the same time, we have to reach agreement on what doing better looks like, especially for individuals whose needs are especially complex and enduring.

Creating an operational dashboard
In Douglas Adams' science fiction comedy/parody/satire, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe,* a character named Zaphod Beeblebrox (the renegade president of the universe) steals a really nifty starship. He especially admires the dashboard because it is black, with black dials, black numerals and black indicators. The beauty of this sort of dashboard is that while you don't know where you are going, or how fast you are getting there, you are traveling in utmost style. Operating a human service change initiative without a legitimate feedback system directly linked to our activities and their impact approaches Zaphod's level of technological sophistication.

Chris Meyer and Rick Ross propose a less stylish, but potentially more useful solution: build a dashboard (with readable dials) right into your system as you are designing it.[7] This is not collecting data for a distant evaluation that will occur long after the project is over, but a true feedback system bringing information back to the people who are implementing the new process, while they are implementing it. Meyer and Ross' Operational Dashboard looks different for every change process because the people making the changes design it. They go through a collaborative process in which they first clearly identify the goals for their effort. Then they develop process measures for keeping track of whether they are actually doing what they said they'd be doing in each of the primary functional areas of the enterprise. Then they add the results measures that count most for their key

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[7] Meyer and Ross, *ibid.*p. 313.

constituents (this is best done by asking the constituents directly). Finally, they add some soft (i.e. human-oriented) measures to make sure that the effort is really clicking with the people involved.

To make the dashboard work, Meyer and Ross suggest that graphic representations of the data output be developed and updated regularly. The display might be dials and needles, bar graphs, led indicators (as on an audio amplifier) or in any other form that quickly and directly indicates how the project is going. These can be done on paper, white boards, or with computer programs. The point is to let everyone see, on a regular basis, how things are going.

In wraparound at the child and family team level, we think that the prominent display of four gauges on the operational dashboard will help to subdue the myth of beneficence:

Process: are we doing what we said we were going to do, both in terms of using the steps in the wraparound process and in carrying out the actions we've been assigned through that process?

Impact: have the aspects of a child and family's life that are important to them improved?

Satisfaction: do the child, family and other team members participating in the process feel that it is working well?

Stewardship: are we making a reasonable and economical use of community resources in developing and implementing our plan?

At the program and system level, the same types of readouts are needed, but feedback to these indicators would come from a wider field, reflecting the wider scope of responsibility and attention.

A cautious closing
Competing collaboratives and beneficent myths are difficult gremlins to eradicate. In fact, they seem firmly attached to our basic human nature. Most of the time, the best we can hope for is an artful accommodation. But the more conscious we are of these inherently self-defeating tendencies and the more we agree to confront them openly, the better our chances of learning more successful strategies for reducing their impact and increasing our success.

In our next article, we will feature the last two members of the gremlin hall of fame: getting trapped in the crisis cycle and substituting process for action.