

# The Paper Boat Guide to Navigating Organizational Sea Changes



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**Meditations:** *“Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange.”*  
-Shakespeare

*“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.  
The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.  
As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”*  
-Abraham Lincoln

*“The art of progress is to preserve order amid change,  
And to preserve change amid order.”*  
-Alfred North Whitehead

*“Change is inevitable –  
Except from a vending machine.”*  
-Robert C. Gallagher

## **Introduction:**

When leaders and stakeholders in human service organizations are trembling on the brink of large-scale change, it can be helpful to have a structured way to think about the rough passage ahead. As an aide to this effort, the Paper Boat Guide is intended to serve as both an attitude adjustment and a compass. It's often difficult to lay a course when big waves surround us, but by talking through some key questions we can remind ourselves of a few things, like why we went out sailing in the first place, and the fact that we are all still in this boat together. Please use the questions that follow as gentle prompts for further conversation, because the best maps are most likely to be found in your hearts, your experiences and your relationships.

## Step One – Change for a Reason

What isn't happening that should be happening – or what is happening that shouldn't be?

- What is the nature and form of the disconfirming information that has caused you to believe that your agency must make large-scale changes in order to survive?
- Do you have reliable and objective information sources to tell you about important things that are or aren't happening?
- If you don't, what can you do to become better informed?

### *Exercise:*

Pick no more than three measurable indicators that target your primary areas of concern.

- If they are process-related (are we doing what we said we would do?) find an efficient observation point for determining how often and under what circumstances these key process elements occur.
- If they are qualitative (is what we are doing helping?) decide on a way to collect and scale the outcome and satisfaction elements that insures their accuracy and usability.
- If they are knowledge-related (are we figuring out ways of doing it better?) think of a good place to place a net that you can use to troll your agency and its customers to capture innovations as they surface.
- If they relate to your operational environment (what do people want of us, what will they give us to do these things for them?) what are the clearest indicators of the service expectations and parameters that will be in play over the next 12 months?

Collect data from your chosen indicators for a reasonable period of time and then compare the results with your assumptions about the need for change.

- If a storm is indeed coming, or if you are in the midst of a storm, what kind of a storm is it?
- Given the nature of the storm, what kind of boat (organizational structure and business plan) is best adapted to the conditions?
- How different is that best-adapted boat to the one you are currently using?
- If you keep the same kind of boat you have now, will you weather the storm?
- If not, what will it take to transform your boat into the new design?
- If you believe big change is needed, how much agreement is there among your crew and passengers about the need and direction for change?

After considering these questions, if you still are thinking about getting into the change business in a major way, then move onto the next questions.

## Step Two – Be True to the Spirit

In the midst of change, what are the key elements that should stay the same?

- What is at the heart of what you do and why you do it?
- How well does your agency's current mission and methodology align with its culture and history?

### *Exercise:*

Create a timeline of key events in your agency's life story.

- Who got it started, and why?
- What were the conditions and unmet needs that were so compelling that it inspired the actions necessary to get the boat launched in the first place?
- What big changes has the agency gone through?
  - What circumstances caused the earlier changes?
  - What worked and didn't work back then?
  - What stayed the same during those changes?
- How has leadership changed over time?
  - What were the variations in style and effectiveness?
  - What spoken and unspoken legacies have been left by the changes in leadership?
- What are the key artifacts and symbols of your agency (places, structures, documents, catch phrases)?
  - Where did they come from?
  - Why are they invested with extra meaning and value?

What does an examination of the course you have sailed so far tell you about what you must do to prepare for the next portion of your voyage?

- Have some key conflicts in values and vision emerged that should be resolved before you push onward?
- What is the central message about human services that your agency should express to the community and to its own personnel?
- What are you doing now that is not in line with the spirit of the agency?
- What aren't you doing that you are called to do by your mission?
- What sort of organizational design best matches with your agency's foundational mission, vision and values?

If it continues to look like you are going to have to do more than just trim the sails or adjust the rudder to stay afloat and on course, then move to the next step.

### Step Three – Get Clear on the Concept

What are the core operating principles that your agency uses to help its clients achieve better life outcomes?

- What is the theory of change underlying the services you provide?
- How well are your agency's current organizational structures, operating systems and personnel arrangements aligned with that theory of change?
- Do your crews and captains know why they are doing things the way they are?

*Exercise:*

1. Build a theory of change for each of your core services:
  - a. Who constitutes the target population for these services?
  - b. What is the specific type of help that the services are intended to deliver?
  - c. What are the specific changes that this help is intended to produce?
  - d. Why do you think that providing those services to that population will produce the outcomes that you have identified?
2. Create a map of your service delivery system that follows your involvement with a client from first referral to last contact:
  - a. Who does what, when and how?
  - b. What decision trees operate at key points?
  - c. What criteria are applied at each decision point?
  - d. What other agencies or systems have inputs into the process, and where do they occur?
  - e. Into what other agencies or systems does your process flow, and when?
  - f. How does it feel to be a client moving through the process?
3. Create a map of your personnel system:
  - a. Who is responsible for doing what?
  - b. How do their actions contribute to implementing your theory of change?
  - c. What core skills are needed to function most effectively in each position?
  - d. How does the process of selection, training, support and supervision of the staff in each position contribute to the effective operation of the agency?
  - e. How does it feel to be a person working in this service unit?

What do your system and personnel maps tell you about your agency?

- Are there important gaps in the service process?
- How client-centered are your operations?
- How reliable is your theory of change?
- How effective are the discriminators in your decision tree?
- Do you have the right people doing the right work with the right skills at the right time with the right attitude?
- What changes are needed in your design to be well adapted both to the operational environment and to the needs of your clients?

Given your sense of the new design, move to the next step to start putting it in action.

## Step Four – Build the Tool Kit

What are the core competencies of your organization and what needs to be done to insure that they are expressed consistently and effectively?

- What are the primary service, support, supervisory and management positions in your current design and how do they translate in your new design?
- What skill sets should be present in each of the positions in your new design, and do they include skills that are not carried by your current staff?

*Exercise:*

1. Assemble your current set of job descriptions:
  - a. Do they accurately reflect the skills and responsibilities of the positions they represent?
  - b. Are they consistent both within service units and across the agency?
  - c. What is your current system for insuring that the right staff are hired to fill each position?
  - d. Are you able to determine whether the actual performance of the staff filling these positions matches the expectations in the job descriptions?
2. Redraw your job description to fit the new design:
  - a. Who does what, when and how?
  - b. What fundamental skills and knowledge will be needed at all positions?
  - c. What additional skills and knowledge will be needed for each position?
  - d. How do the various job descriptions interrelate?
3. What needs to be in place to insure that the personnel acquisition and integration pathway supports the new design:
  - a. Can the job descriptions be simplified and linked directly to the agency's core mission and theory of change?
  - b. Can the job announcements, descriptions, hiring criteria, training program and staff supervision criteria be aligned with one another?
  - c. How will you provide consistent and proactive supervision so that staff are able to grow into the new positions?

How will you support the continuing improvement in your organization's core competencies?

- What will you change in your hiring, retention and advancement systems?
- How can you shift from didactic to experiential instruction?
- How will you instill the spirit of the agency in each new staff person?
- How will you help each new staff person understand how what he or she does helps the agency's clients achieve positive outcomes?

Once you have a clear idea of the skills that will be needed in the new design, and how you are going to make sure they are present, its time to move to the next step.

### Step Five – Balance Practice and Procedure

Do your agency's documentation and accountability systems empower staff to do whatever it takes to help clients achieve positive outcomes?

- What are your existing documentation and accountability systems?
- How well are they aligned with your core mission and competencies?
- What can be done to balance the need to insure that staff are doing what they have been hired to do with the need that those staff have to be creative and flexible in the assistance they provide to the agency's clients?

#### *Exercise:*

1. Map the paper trail your agency currently uses for service documentation:
  - a. What information is collected in each form, how is it collected, who collects it, and why is it collected?
  - b. What happens to the information after it is recorded?
  - c. What mechanisms are in place to insure that the recorded information is accurate?
2. Map the structures and processes you use to insure that staff are accountable for the effectiveness of the work that they do:
  - a. Who is responsible for doing what, when and how?
  - b. How do you know that desired activities have taken place?
  - c. How do you know whether the desired activities have had the desired results?
  - d. How does the review of activity compliance and service results link to decisions about staff recognition, reward, redirection and retention?
3. What can you do to insure accountability while supporting creativity:
  - a. Can the new design include strategies for reducing duplication and supporting more focused reporting in documentation, and eliminate dead-end documents that do no one any good?
  - b. Can the accountability system be better aligned with the agency's theory of change, core mission and core competencies?
  - c. Can the staff supervision model be shifted to a more consultative, skill-building focus throughout the hierarchy?
  - d. Can the focus on procedural compliance be supplanted by an emphasis on practice excellence as staff acquire and demonstrate necessary core skills?

How will you adapt your accountability system to the demands of your new design?

- What will the new documentation system teach staff and clients?
- How will the new system amaze and delight your funding sources?
- How will staff acquire the motivation to embrace earned accountability?
- How will staff be recognized as they progress from novice, to proficient, to expert to mentor?

A parallel resource to your accountability system is your communication system, which will be discussed in the next step.

### Step Six – Listen to Learn; Learn to Listen

Does your agency have clear and consistent, 2-way, formal and informal systems to insure effective communication both across units and throughout the hierarchy?

- How are important messages transmitted from leadership to line staff?
- How does information flow from line staff to leadership?
- When more than one service unit is assisting a client, what do those units do to insure that everyone stays on the same page?
- How are important messages transmitted from agency staff to agency clients and stakeholders, and, in turn how do they communicate with the agency?

#### *Exercise:*

1. Issue an important message and track its progress:
  - a. Use random interviews with staff across units and throughout the hierarchy, as well as clients and stakeholders to find out who heard what, and when, and how they interpreted the message.
  - b. Talk with staff, clients and stakeholders. Ask them about messages they have tried to send to other units and up through the hierarchy. Were the messages received and accurately understood?
  - c. What mechanisms are in place to insure that disseminated information moves quickly and accurately to its intended recipients?
2. Find out where staff, clients and stakeholders obtained the information about your agency's operations that they perceive as being most helpful:
  - a. Ask a client who has been receiving services for some time who explained to them the way things really work at your agency.
  - b. Ask a staff person that has been with the agency for at least 6 months to describe how they came to learn about their real job duties and the unwritten rules of the agency.
  - c. Similarly, ask a stakeholder the sources of information they rely upon most when making a decision about the effectiveness of your agency.
3. Think about the communication systems you would like in your new design:
  - a. How can leaders learn to model and teach effective communication skills?
  - b. What can be used to create effective formal and informal boundary spanning mechanisms to support improved collaboration?
  - c. Can you foster informal communities of practice around core competencies both within the agency and with your system partners?

What are some initial steps toward better communication?

- How about a buffet lunch to support informal chatting?
- Cross-unit skill teams?
- Establish a rumor clearing house?
- A message reception and acknowledgement system to insure that what you said was what they heard?

Along with accountability and communication, the third leg of the organizational information stool is prioritization. That's the final step in the redesign process.

### Step Seven – Keep Track of the Important Stuff

How can you be sure that your agency is doing what you said it would do, and that it is helping your clients achieve better outcomes, without burying yourself in data and tying up everyone's time filling out forms?

- What are your current information feedback mechanisms?
- How do you measure accuracy in process, and effectiveness in product?
- Are there particular bits of information that reliably reflect larger but related constellations of data?
- What information is most important to your agency staff and administration, your stakeholders and your clients?

#### *Exercise:*

1. Figure out who is asking for what, and why:
  - a. What information do you ask your staff to record; what do you do with it?
  - b. What information do your stakeholders ask for; what do they do with it?
  - c. Which measures of process and outcome are most closely aligned with the theory of change that is the basis of your agency's operations?
2. Think about the information that would most help your staff do their job better:
  - a. Are there currently any feedback systems that help staff see whether the interventions they are using are producing the desired changes?
  - b. Can staff tell you what information would be most useful to them?
  - c. Do clients have a feedback system to help them visualize their progress?
3. Choose a few simple measures and a way to quickly collect and present them:
  - a. Look at the process map for your new system. What 2 or three points best indicate good progress?
  - b. Look at your new personnel system. What elements will most accurately reflect effective and professional services?
  - c. Think of these items as dials on a dashboard. How can you collect and turn around information fast enough that staff and clients can use it to guide their activities?

What information system best reflects your core values and mission?

- “We pay attention to \_\_\_\_\_ because it is the heart of what we do!”
- “Here is a simple chart that shows why we are more effective this year than we were last year.”
- “This data shows a break in our process chain that has to be repaired.”

### Conclusion

Keeping a human service agency afloat and on course in these stormy times takes the cooperative effort of everyone on board. One way to help make progress is to use exercises like those in this guide to form a shared vision of the what, how and why of these fragile vessels we build to ensure that none of us sails alone no matter how rough the seas.