Leadership Change Within a System During an Implementation Effort: Considerations After Implementing Trauma-Informed Care in Child Welfare and Behavioral Health Systems

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Introduction

Leadership is a crucial force within the ever-changing landscape of a social service system. Particularly during implementation efforts, leaders contribute proximal and distal influence on how change happens for an organization. Implementation scientists have explored the specific leadership decision-making processes contributing to adoption or dismissal of change efforts (Palinkas, Campbell, & Saldana, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2017) and ways leaders influence organizational climate, innovation, and strategic alignment (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Sklar, 2014; Aarons, Sommerfeld, & Willging, 2011). With such a critical role, leadership change often creates challenging ripples throughout an organization during implementation efforts. New directions can include immediate changes in leadership decision making, priorities and perceptions, implementation team alignment, and subsequent changes in the organizational context.

During multi-year implementation projects for child-serving social service systems, such as child welfare and children's behavioral health, leadership change is the norm. However, there is a great deal still to

understand about this frequent occurrence and how it serves to facilitate or hinder implementation progress. Policy makers, change effort funders, implementation intermediaries, system leaders, and system staff alike are treading essentially unmapped terrain as leader shift occurs during implementation efforts.

The California Screening, Assessment, and Treatment (CASAT) Initiative was implemented through the Chadwick Center for Children Youth and Families at Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego, in partnership with the California Department of Social Services and funded by the Children's Bureau and Office of the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The 5-year project started in 2012 and centered on the implementation of trauma-informed practices in child welfare and in children's behavioral health systems throughout California. Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a developing concept that includes a collection of evidence-based and evidence-informed practices used to enhance the ways service systems "recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system including children, caregivers, and service providers" (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NTCSN], 2007, ln 1).

The CASAT Initiative specifically emphasized

implementation of screening systems to identify trauma-related needs for children and youth served by child welfare systems, leading to trauma-informed mental health assessment and subsequent delivery of trauma-focused, trauma-informed, and evidence-based mental health treatments. Workforce development was also emphasized during the CASAT Initiative, including special attention to organizational climate, attitudes toward evidence-based practices (EBPs), cross-system collaboration, and staff training in the concept of TIC. Different elements of the project took place in several of California's 58 county-administered child welfare or children's behavioral health systems. In the process, we encountered multiple leadership changes with varying impacts on our implementation efforts.

As an initial step to further explore, measure, prevent, and intervene when leadership change could disrupt an implementation effort, we propose a model for considering crucial contributing factors for an implementation project when leadership change occurs. This leadership change model includes characteristics of the implementation effort pre- and post-leadership change, as well as elements of the system context, such as system attributes as well as characteristics of the outgoing and incoming leaders. We then provide a case example based on experiences from the CASAT Initiative to apply this model and better understand the role of leadership change, the outputs in the model, and next steps to address the impact of leadership change for implementation intermediaries and social service system leaders.

For the current model, we define *leadership change* as occurring when "an individual (a) is in a position of leadership, responsibility, and power in a given system, (b) is contributing directly or indirectly to a specific implementation effort that is taking place in the system, and this individual (c) changes roles within the system." Based on this definition, leadership change occurs broadly through an organization, from a high level (such as a CEO or deputy director), to a day-to-day manager, or to a peripherally involved leader. It can include changes caused by promotion, demotion, lateral moves within the organization, or exit from the organization. We offer the following model with the goal of beginning

to better understand how leadership change influences change efforts. Increased attention to this topic will gradually spur more effective techniques to mitigate negative and maximize positive influences caused by leadership changes during system and organization improvement efforts.
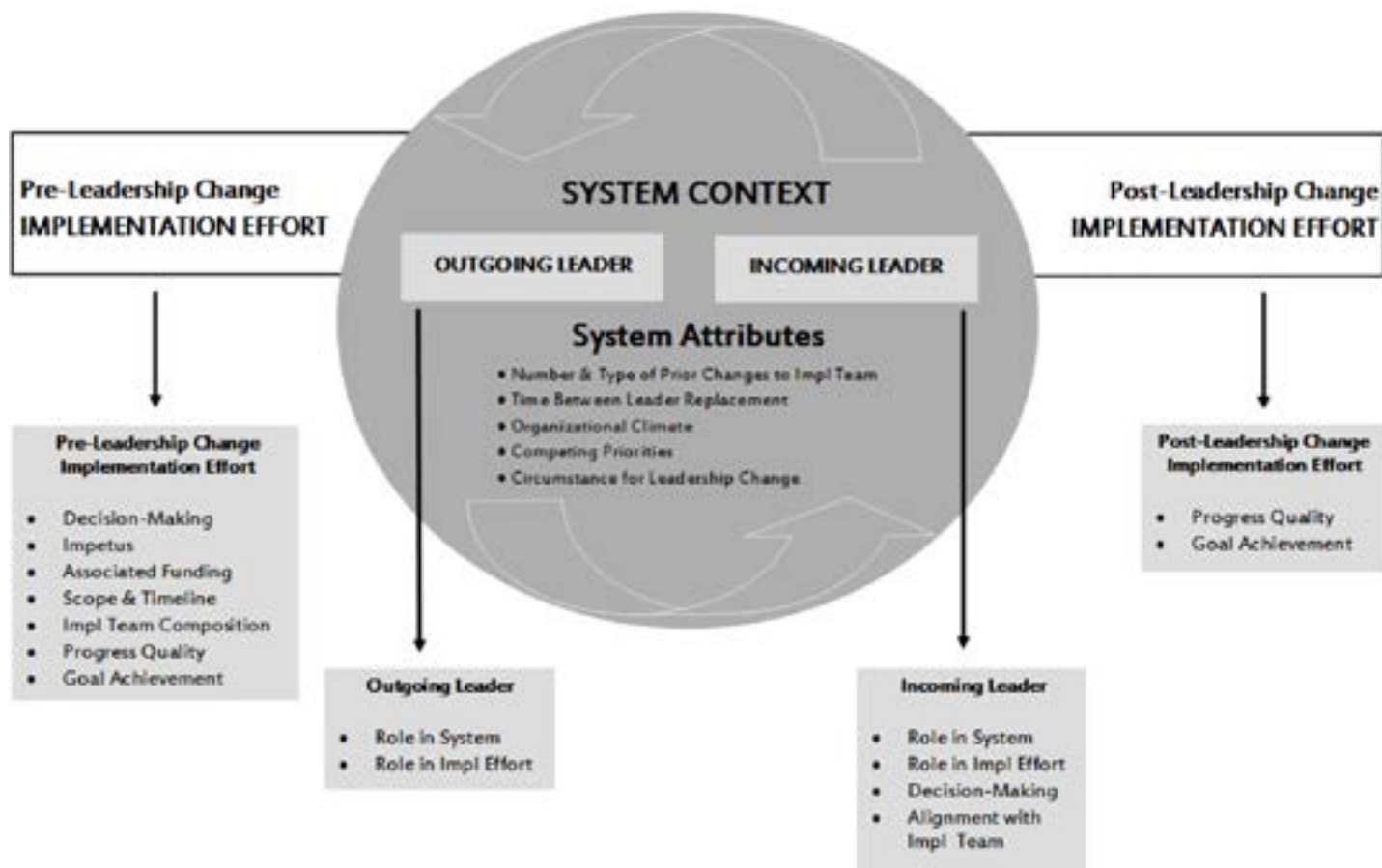
Model for Leadership Change

Most research related to this topic has focused on employee turnover, as opposed to changes at the management level (Parker & Skitmore, 2005), and existing research on leadership change has typically focused on executive-level changes in corporations and their impact on subsequent company performance. A body of literature examines leadership change in sports teams (Carroll, 1984; Gamson & Scotch, 1964; Grusky, 1963) and, more recently, the impact of project manager changes during IT and software development projects. Although there is limited research on leadership change in social services systems, we explore extant research from assorted sectors in the context of our experience with the CASAT Initiative to develop a heuristic model of the impacts of leadership change during implementation efforts. This model is presented in Figure 1 and then described in detail—organized by pre-leadership change characteristics of the implementation effort, the system context factors associated with the change itself (including characteristics of the outgoing and incoming leaders, and attributes of the system in which the leadership change occurs)—followed by the resulting effects of the leadership change on the implementation effort.

Implementation Effort: Pre-Leadership Change

The decision making associated with undertaking an implementation effort makes a powerful impact on how new leaders perceive the effort. Based on Palinkas et al. (2017), decision making crucially includes the perceived costs and benefits associated with the adoption, perceived system capacity for adoption, and perceived acceptability of adopting the practice changes. For example, a change effort preceded by a collaborative and intentional decision-making process, aligned with an overarching strategic

Figure 1. Model for Leadership Change Within a System During an Implementation Effort.

SYSTEM CONTEXT

OUTGOING LEADER **INCOMING LEADER**

System Attributes
- Number & Type of Prior Changes to Impl Team
- Time Between Leader Replacement
- Organizational Climate
- Competing Priorities
- Circumstance for Leadership Change

Pre-Leadership Change IMPLEMENTATION EFFORT

Post-Leadership Change IMPLEMENTATION EFFORT

Pre-Leadership Change Implementation Effort
- Decision-Making
- Impetus
- Associated Funding
- Scope & Timeline
- Impl Team Composition
- Progress Quality
- Goal Achievement

Post-Leadership Change Implementation Effort
- Progress Quality
- Goal Achievement

Outgoing Leader
- Role in System
- Role in Impl Effort

Incoming Leader
- Role in System
- Role in Impl Effort
- Decision-Making
- Alignment with Impl Team

plan and involving colleagues and stakeholders at different levels of the organization, will be perceived very differently from a change effort started by an opportunistic decision by a single leader with overburdened, inattentive, or unconcerned colleagues and stakeholders. If the decision-making process is not articulated or is unintentional, new leaders are unlikely to adopt the previous leader's reasoning. Similarly, if an outgoing leader perceives acceptability of the change effort based solely on feelings, opinions, personal experiences, or biases, one could expect high likelihood of immediate incongruence in perceived acceptability from a new leader.

Prior to a shift in leadership, initial characteristics of the change considerations (such as funding, scope, and timeline) will influence perceptions, attitudes, and commitment of those involved in the change effort and inevitably influence implementation team perceptions and the strategies used to respond to leadership transition. Was the effort initially elective for members of the implementation team or compulsory? Was the change intended to build on previous work completed

by the organization, or did it represent the vision of a sole strong leader?

Organizations with longstanding academic-practice partnerships or shared values across levels of management might undertake sturdier change efforts than those championed by a distinctive leader. In each example, the organizations may be poised for success at the onset of the change effort, but loss of the distinctive visionary leader may result in loss of the change-prompting vision. This would create a more disruptive transition than loss of a comparable leader within an organization with widely held shared values. Changes prompted by legislative mandate or court order will have specific consequences for discontinuing (e.g., not meeting legal requirements, potential for funding recoupment).

The scope and timeline of a change often signal the level of coordination and commitment required to accomplish the task. Scope includes the proportion of leadership, staff, consumers, and system programs involved in or influenced by the intended

change. Scope also involves the expected degree of transformation or deviation from the status quo. Often the implementation timelines are developed to align with system needs early in the change effort; however, the flexibility of that timeline becomes critical when leadership change occurs and needs within a system shift.

Team composition also influences how change efforts continue as leadership reorganizes. A project involving only internal staff might be easier to discontinue, while one involving external stakeholders or a contracted intermediary organization may be more stable, as the structure is likely more formalized.

Finally, quality of existing progress and goal achievement of the change effort will play a role in stakeholder commitment and engagement. A project in its early stages may be more easily derailed, whereas one with several years of successful effort is more likely to continue and succeed (Carroll, 1984). The level of goal achievement might be best conceptualized within the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS) model of evidence-based practice implementation (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011). While disruption can occur at any stage, one might expect change efforts in the Exploration and Planning phases to be more easily disrupted by leadership change than those in later stages (i.e., Implementation and Sustainment).

System Context

Beyond the context of the implementation effort itself, system and organizational attributes are continuously influencing each member of the implementation team, the setting for the change, and the leaders involved in the effort. Those organizational contexts are likewise influenced by outgoing and incoming leaders.

Outgoing leader. The gap left by the outgoing leader can range from hardly noticeable to dramatically influential, depending on the type of role changes that occur, both for the system and the implementation team. Shift from a system leader, such as a director charged with setting the strategic roadmap for the organization, will be very different from that of a mid-level supervisor. The impact of change on the implementation team will also vary

based on the formal and informal roles of the outgoing leader. Was the outgoing leader a main champion or driving force behind the effort or the day-to-day manager of the effort? Was she or he actively involved in the implementation team, or did she or he take a supportive role in the background? On the other hand, a staff person may be promoted up in the system, or make a lateral change, but continue to be part of the implementation team. In some situations, these internal changes may lead to the person discontinuing active involvement, while still being accessible for periodic questions or her ability to effect change as part of the implementation team may increase.

System attributes. The frequency and type of prior changes to the implementation team, the time lapse between outgoing leader replacement with the incoming leader, the organizational climate, competing priorities, and circumstances for leadership change are important considerations. For example, the impact of a retirement or promotion on the implementation team may contribute to a sense of stability while staff termination or resignation could have the opposite effect. These changes may lead to reduced overall team performance due to the loss of historical memory that the departing team member(s) maintained (Carley, 1992; Huy, 1999; Argote, 1993).

The type of organization (public versus private) in which the change is occurring and any associated political or social pressure may impact on the continued progress of the implementation effort. The leadership structure in the organization may also play a role—how many leaders are there and how well integrated are they? For example, a small organization with concentrated leadership may struggle more with turnover at the deputy director level than an organization with multiple deputy directors. Timing of leadership change also plays a role. Was this change one in a string of multiple leadership changes within the overall system? Changes in multiple positions in a short period of time may destabilize the overall system, while a position left vacant for a long period of time may result in other leaders becoming overworked as they try to divvy up responsibilities. These factors interact with the system's existing organizational climate, as well as the overall level of receptiveness inside the organization to the change effort (e.g., are

staff generally supportive or is the change unpopular?).

Incoming leader. Once the transition has occurred and a new leader is in place, the new leader's characteristics will impact the ongoing change effort. First, what is her or his role in the system? Is she or he appointed as a permanent or temporary replacement? Researchers have observed poorer team performance during the period in which the interim high-level leader serves (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010). The new leader's previous role is also important, with inside succession or promotion found to be associated with improvement in team performance; whereas, succession from outside the organization (e.g., hiring a leader who is new to the organization) has been associated with some deterioration in team performance (Grusky, 1963).

The incoming leader's assumed role in the implementation effort is also critical and can be influenced by the leader's personality and leadership characteristics. For example, what is her leadership approach and how receptive are staff members to this approach and the leader herself? Does the new leader have a shared value base with the implementation team or are there incongruences that will cause conflict?

Similar to pre-leadership change, this is a period that includes decision making for the new leader, including conducting a cost-benefit analysis, examining the capacity for continuing the effort, and assessing the acceptability of the change effort for the new leader (Palinkas et al., 2017). One management and system dynamics researcher found that new managers are often less committed than the original project managers and make changes that may impact project performance (Abdel-Hamid, 1992). These key decision points are likely to influence how responsive and engaged the new leader will be in the project and how the new leader will align with the implementation team.

Implementation Effort: Post-Leadership Change

While the outcome of interest in this model is the impact of leadership change on the implementation

effort, these are many ways to operationalize the impact. For example, the quality of ongoing progress for the implementation effort may be affected by the transition. Changes in stakeholder participation, engagement, and responsiveness can be enhanced or disrupted as new leaders influence the implementation effort. In fact, existing research suggests manager turnover has a significant impact on project cost and duration (Abdel-Hamid, 1992). Additionally, achievement of the implementation team's goals may also be affected. Both progress quality and goal achievement are likely influenced by loss of historical memory due to transition and the impact of a learning curve or orientation phase when the new leader comes on board (Chapman, 1998; Abdel-Hamid, 1989, 1992).

The implementation effort itself may also be changed as the new leader puts his or her own stamp on the process, especially when someone is brought in from an outside sector or agency. In general, the less familiarity a new leader has with the organization and the field in which it works, the more likely it is that comprehensive organizational change will take place (Villadsen, 2012). This type of leadership change is not unusual in social services systems such as Child Welfare, in which a system leader with management experience but little content knowledge may be brought in to respond to a crisis or address perceived performance issues by "shaking things up."

Application of the Model: A Case Study

Over the course of the CASAT Initiative, one county exemplified varying leadership changes leading to a broad range of adaptations in our collaborative implementation work and subsequent changes to the post-leadership change implementation effort.

Implementation Effort: Pre-Leadership Change

In our early discussions to explore collaboration with this county, we relied on existing ties with a key senior leader who had visionary strategic goals tied to TIC that closely aligned with our organization and with whom we had collaborated previously. The foreseeable resource and capacity demands for being

involved in the CASAT Initiative offered benefits far outweighing costs given her commitment to TIC and our shared experiences together. From this alignment, she volunteered her system in this multi-year project, created capacity by identifying within-system stakeholders who would be engaged in the effort, and engaged senior leader colleagues in other sectors to do the same.

Our early work with this county included a day-to-day manager who served as the key leader directly supporting the implementation effort. This manager shared and supported the strategic goals of the senior leader but was tasked with confronting and overcoming the obstacles we would encounter. Consideration of these inevitable practical barriers may have contributed to marginal weariness, though he still demonstrated an engaged and empowered approach to our shared work. For example, a new position was created to strengthen a TIC training initiative, but during the wait for funding of this position, a valued employee left the organization after becoming overburdened as she tried to cover the new responsibilities and her previous role. This turnover impacted the day-to-day leader and his team immediately as they redistributed responsibilities and hurried to hire for both positions. While both the day-to-day and the senior leaders perceived CASAT Initiative changes as positive, the path to those changes included higher immediate and direct costs for the day-to-day leader. Nonetheless, we were able to collaboratively increase the system training capacity related to TIC and create a trauma screening system.

System Context

After taking steps to implement two major changes in the organization, with the implementation team in place and emphasis shifting from implementation to sustainment and exploration of the next step of our initiative, two leadership changes occurred. In a 3-month window, the senior leader was promoted, and the day-to-day manager retired.

Outgoing leader. The senior leader, a visionary and strategic leader in the system, was promoted to oversee two large systems as well as the system in which we were implementing change. Prior to the change, she provided the foundation for the

project by establishing collaborative partnerships and communicating her vision and goals related to the project. After laying the foundation, she was only peripherally involved in the practice changes. The day-to-day leader, an experienced and respected mid-level manager overseeing specific crucial programs for our work, and with whom we constantly communicated and collaborated, informed the implementation team that she had decided to retire from the organization in 2 months.

System attributes. Upon promotion, the senior leader was replaced by one of her direct report staff as the interim and then appointed senior leader. However, after the retirement of the day-to-day manager, a lapse of 8 months took place that included two interim leaders joining the implementation team, then one interim leader, and finally the appointment of a new leader, who was internal to the system but uninvolved in the implementation effort prior to the predecessor's retirement. The implementation team was generally stable prior to the leadership changes, with only one implementation team member and champion of the effort shifting laterally and leaving the team.

Organizational climate during a time of significant leadership change may be an unstable construct to measure because changes in leadership are known to influence organizational climate (Aarons, Sommerfeld, & Willging, 2011). Certainly, the organizational climate in these leaders' system seemed to fluctuate during the initiative. We encountered shifts in culture spreading through the organization gradually, possibly mediated by varying leadership levels within the hierarchy of the organization.

At the onset and close of our time collaborating, we administered the organizational climate subscale of the Survey of Organizational Functioning (Institute of Behavioral Research, 2005) to staff at all levels of the system, which revealed average organizational climate, generally consistent with other social service systems based on national norms established for the tool (Lehman, Greener, & Simpson, 2002). Nevertheless, this system-level survey did reveal shifts in organizational climate (e.g., reduced cohesion, reduced autonomy) over the course of our project.

Additionally, at the time of transition between the outgoing and incoming day-to-day leaders, new state-directed changes unrelated to TIC were required and rolled out to the county, requiring time-sensitive implementation from the system and thus reducing some capacity for our change effort.

Incoming leader. In both cases of leadership change (the senior leader and day-to-day manager), the incoming leaders were hired from internal staff previously uninvolved in the CASAT Initiative. These incoming leaders were assigned to the same positions as their predecessors, although their influence in the systems was different. The new senior leader was well-respected but less visionary in his approach to guiding the system, playing a supportive role to his predecessor's work as he became oriented to the position. He continued peripheral support of the CASAT project and sustainment of the practice changes that had been implemented. However, with the new senior leader supporting an existing strategic plan rather than creating and cultivating his own vision, there seemed to be slightly less engagement or alignment in the partnership to implement CASAT-related practices.

The incoming day-to-day manager was very pragmatic and seemed to prioritize executing standard system operational efforts (adhering to and meeting requirements of the state or policies of the system). After initial discussions with CASAT staff and the implementation team to orient the new leader, she did not attend implementation team meetings and became involved only after prodding from senior leadership. Once participating on the implementation team, her involvement was focused on completing the tasks at hand and the team membership began to rapidly change with only one original system-based team member still involved in the effort after 2 months.

The decision-making processes of these incoming leaders were not transparent to our team as implementation intermediaries, but there seemed to be indications that perceptions of costs and benefits and acceptability had changed for the day-to-day manger. The misalignment with the implementation team was evident but quickly became irrelevant as the team was nearly entirely re-staffed.

Implementation Effort: Post-Leadership Change

The new senior leader seemed aligned with goals of the implementation team but was previously uninvolved in CASAT change efforts. Consequently, the previous CASAT Initiative status of "centrally important in the senior leader's priorities" diminished. The quality of our prior progress had not changed, but the perceptions of this collaborative progress (perceived value, acceptability, cost/benefit ratio) had shifted with the leadership transition. We had fewer interactions with the implementation team and communication was primarily funneled to the day-to-day manager with a focus on defining the discrete remaining steps. Emails from the day-to-day leader included defining phrases, such as "I have been asked to follow up…," or requests to clarify specific commitments the organization had made with us. Prior to the leadership change, the implementation work was collaborative, with ideas and work generated from county and intermediary members of the implementation team. This status change impacted future goal achievement for the project. We followed through with and concluded our collaborative in-progress steps, but with no clear champions remaining in the process and a new emphasis on achieving the remaining steps as quickly as possible.

The day-to-day manager declined a final undefined discrete step related to building capacity for trauma-informed evidence-based practices. We presented this step as optional and transparently informed leadership we had another county system eager to participate in the project to reduce perceptions of obligation to participate in the last step. Although support continued from the initial senior-level leader and generally from her replacement, their attention was pulled to different areas and the landscape in which the CASAT Initiative operated for this county changed almost entirely.

Although this case study presents an example of leadership diminishing the progress quality and goal achievement of our change effort, we also had experiences with opposite outcomes. In one county children's behavioral health system, a day-to-day manager (who was a key champion to our change effort and the implementation team) was promoted to

a senior leadership position. This leadership change enhanced and encouraged the progress quality and goal achievement of our collaborative efforts.

Implications and Next Steps

In the final analysis, one of the most daunting challenges of creating change in social service settings is maintaining progress over time and through leadership transitions. The unpredictable nature of these frequent leadership change events can appear to create inevitable disruptions. Without concerted efforts, the introduction of program improvements become meaningless over time as the agency or department lurches from one initiative to the next without ever building upon the success of what has

Initial steps for forming the implementation team can systematize multi-level, multiple stakeholder involvement in a change effort. In this way, the disruption of leadership change in a single system is somewhat partitioned, and multiple systems and stakeholders serve as champions for the effort during leadership transitions.

Second, the implementation team process should be well documented, including meeting notes, relevant communications with agency administrators, and decision documents. For example, at the end of each stage of implementation or periodically, it may be helpful to create a historical summary of the current process. These summaries can emphasize the

Leadership stability in child welfare is critical for the sustainability of evidence-based practices for children and families. Leadership changes, however, can derail even the most diligent implementation. Exploring the effect of leadership stability and transitions on evidence-based practice implementation could lead to critical new insights among researchers, policy makers, and system leaders.

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come before. Our exploration of this phenomenon has led to implications and recommended next steps for implementation intermediaries, system leaders, policy makers, and other stakeholders and organizations contributing to change efforts in large systems.

For individuals involved in technical assistance, implementation intermediaries, or implementation teams driving a change process or EBP implementation, concrete steps can be taken to encourage a smooth transition process. First, the multi-level and multi-stakeholder nature of the implementation team itself can be a strong support for the effort, as it will be clear to the incoming leader that there is a broad backing and buy-in for the change.

decision making associated with the change effort, the contributing stakeholders, and how implementation outcomes are tied to overarching system needs or goals. These summaries can be reviewed as new stakeholders engage in the implementation process and can be useful for orienting new leaders to the process. Further, these summaries might provide concrete support and clarity to the current direction of the project.

Third, in addition to strategic team creation and written support for the process, the implementation team may want to be involved in the new leader hiring process to encourage shared value and alignment with the implementation effort. Whether as part of the

recruitment and interview process or when providing feedback on the job description and task assignments, the team can help set the tone for the continuation of the project from the start of the transition process.

Last, in some instances system change purveyors may "follow along" with administrators as they move from one agency to another, working to ensure a direct warm handoff of existing projects from the outgoing leader to the new leader. Purveyors and implementation intermediaries may want to target high-level administration groups, such as the Board of Supervisors, to ensure that both sides have a mutual understanding of the benefits of implementing the change effort and how the changes align with the values and goals of the larger agency or government. Developing a long-term deep relationship between purveyors and forward-thinking agency leadership can be mutually beneficial while ensuring continued forward movement during implementation. The actions of system leaders will also be critical for an implementation project.

Both incoming and outgoing leaders bear a responsibility for maintaining progress in quality improvement initiatives even if they inherited the effort from their predecessor, as do their subordinate staff and those who manage them. At times the outgoing leader may feel powerless to influence the person who follows them, especially in the case of changing political winds in public agency leadership. That should not excuse any one from taking proactive steps to shape how the next leadership team embraces important initiatives. This can take several forms, including in-system staff strategically building internal and external stakeholder support, and advocating for continued progress as the new leadership team takes shape. This may mean reaching across the aisle politically to those who have influence with the new leaders or to nonpartisan groups who have sway with the new leader. Such stakeholder constituencies can also be created internally to actively support the continued effort. The extent to which improvements can be woven into the very culture of the organization so that they become "just the way we do business around here," is the degree to which they become more resistant to the whims of a new and unsupportive leader. Finally, the outgoing leader can prepare a

formal briefing document that explains the nature of key initiatives, who the key players are, the likely benefits of the effort, and how to share it with those who will follow.

By a similar token, it is important that new leaders pause and assess, particularly when coming into the role after an acrimonious election in a public agency or an unplanned and stressful departure of their processor. As a practical matter, before assuming that any change the predecessor supported is bad, and before the launch of new efforts, new leaders must pause and evaluate carefully all the efforts underway. Ask the staff and stakeholder what is working about the change. The best move may not be to start new initiatives that bear your personal stamp, but to fully embrace change already underway and carry it into day-to-day reality for the benefit of the families the agency serves. Without that type of thoughtful leadership, the risk is great that an organization will never truly progress due to the egos of its leaders.

Conclusion

Our intent in the initial exploration of leadership change is to urge continued and ongoing attention to this critical aspect of implementation system change efforts. The ubiquitous nature of system change impacts all stakeholders and the general capacity for meaningful, sustained improvement for large systems. The proposed model and associated recommendations are informed based on the limited research on the topic and our experiences with a multi-year implementation project across multiple child welfare and children's behavioral health county systems in California. We hope the understanding of these crucial factors and contributors will advance over time, informed by empirical evaluation. The capacity to sustain meaningful change efforts during leadership transitions will improve the efficacy of policy makers, funders, implementation intermediaries, system leaders, system staff, and ultimately the capacity for child welfare and behavioral health systems to strengthen children, youth, and families.

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Acknowledgements

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