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**Embracing Ignorance, Error, & Fallibility:  
Competencies for Leadership of Effective Services**

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\* A somewhat different version of this paper is published in S. Taylor and D. Biklen, eds. *Community Integration* (New York, Columbia Teachers College Press: 1987)

I have learned from many collaborative efforts with Connie Lyle to help leaders in this country, Canada, and the United Kingdom plan and evaluate innovative services. In particular, this paper owes a great deal to Jack Pealer, Sandy Landis, and John Winnenberg in Southern Ohio; Bertha Young and Jack Yates in Southeastern Massachusetts; and Kathy Bartholomew-Lorimer, Barbara Banazanski, and Jeff Strully in Louisville, Kentucky

Work with members of York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies –especially David Morley, Peter Dill, and Wayne Tebb– gave me access to current work on the design and leadership of complex systems in turbulent social environments (for an overview, see Ackoff, Broholm, & Snow, 1984; Emery, 1981; and Williams, 1982).

## **Introduction**

The greatest barriers to community living are not inside people with severe handicaps or in the nature of community life but in the way necessary resources are organized. As long as those who design and govern human services wait for people with handicaps and ordinary citizens to get ready to live together, they will contribute to unnecessary isolation. As soon as they exercise leadership in creating opportunities and designing personalized assistance everyone will begin to learn how to be a community which is competent to support all its members. The ability to learn from experiences of ignorance, error, and fallibility builds capable leaders.

This paper is based on what I have learned from people who are developing effective human services and draws on methods for managing complex social systems which are emerging in other fields. It introduces ignorance, error, and fallibility as teachers; outlines the contributions of leadership in complex systems; presents three examples of learning by embracing ignorance, error, and fallibility; discusses some reasons these facts of life may be difficult to acknowledge; and identifies some implications for the design and governance of services and service systems.

These are my criteria for effectiveness in service design and management: creativity in redefining service patterns which exclude people from community life; significant effort to achieve consistency with the principle of normalization (as defined by Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1975; Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983); and adaptiveness in managing the problems that arise in stabilizing and disseminating innovation. I discuss examples from small agencies that are not part of exemplary state systems because I want to explore the possibilities for responsible action under less than favorable circumstances and because I think those who lead good big systems have as much to learn from committed people who are exploring on a small scale as small operators have to learn from them..

## **The Three Teachers**

Leaders who embrace ignorance, error, and fallibility in the design and governance of community services develop important competencies. *Ignorance* results from incomplete knowledge of the possibilities of people for whom available technology is incompletely and variably effective. Embracing ignorance teaches careful attention to the opportunities a particular community offers and to each person's unique and changing interests, gifts, and requirements for accommodation and assistance. *Error* arises from managing complex activities within the ambiguities of a task that is bigger than any one organization's capacities. Embracing error teaches skillful resource management.

*Fallibility* is a defining characteristic of human communities, especially in relationship to dependent, devalued people. Embracing fallibility defines the limits of service and teaches the importance and the possibilities of ordinary associations and relationships.

These three teachers are necessary but unpopular. Some advocates and decision makers have oversold themselves on blueprints for service reform which promise to deliver large scale answers with certainty as long as managers are given enough power and money. In the long run, such promises are disappointing because service designs and management tools based on them are a poor fit with complex, rapidly changing realities. Leaders with the courage to face the three unpopular teachers will discover ways to change devaluing social patterns which are closed to managers who believe they can avoid them.

In commending ignorance, error, and fallibility as teachers, I don't want to discourage people who fight the injustice of segregation on the basis of disability. Promoters of institutionalization (Skodak-Crissey & Rosen, 1986) argue that because community services experience uncertainties, mistakes, and imperfections, institutions deserve tolerance, a place among the range of necessary alternatives, and even greater investments of money. They are wrong. Some problems are ethically more worthy of engagement than others. The difficulties encountered in building communities that support people with severe handicaps are far more central to human development than the problems of repairing institutions that exclude ordinary relationships by design. Institutional defenders say that community service advocates cover their errors with the blanket claim that any community program is better. We must be sure they are mistaken. Wherever it is found, ignorance of common humanity is culpable; errors generated in procedural tinkering with segregated structures are, at their roots, foolish; and the eruption of fallibility into abuse is wrong.

I am interested in what we who are committed to *The Community Imperative* can learn of its meaning when we are thoughtful and decisive about what we don't know; what goes wrong as we act on our commitments; and where the limits to our abilities are.

### **The Contributions of Leadership**

Leadership makes four closely related contributions in the design and governance of effective organizations (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

- Vision: forming and consistently focusing attention on a responsible vision of a desirable future and a definite statement of the values that will guide decisions

toward the vision; staying clear about what is valued as circumstances change and offer new opportunities and threats.

- **Social Architecture:** creating an organizational form and structure that offers a meaningful way for those committed to the vision to work; finding systematic ways to invite and support investment in the values that underlie the vision.
- **Position:** negotiating a relationship with the environment that gathers the resources necessary to work.
- **Learning:** investing in learning more about the meaning of the vision and better ways to work toward it by a process of reflection, criticism, and re-design.

The reality of ignorance, error, and fallibility test and strengthen human service leaders' abilities to make each contribution. The first example illustrates their place in each aspect of renewing an innovative agency.

### **Renewing Commitment**

Residential, Inc. is a small agency serving people with moderate and severe handicaps in the southern part of Perry County, in rural southeastern Ohio. For the past three years its leaders have worked to renew and deepen its vision, restructure its social architecture, re-position its relationship to its community and the larger service system, and learn better ways to work. This extensive effort began when staff realized their collective ignorance of the interests and desires of the people they serve. It has been motivated by a clear quality standard that makes error easy to define. And it has been tested by repeatedly facing the hard lessons of fallibility.

In 1983, Residential, Inc. initiated a self-evaluation. During its first six years, the management team worked hard to fulfill their mission: "to provide dignified living settings for small groups of people with mental retardation." They had paid careful attention to the principle of normalization as they opened four group homes –two carefully designed for people with severe handicaps– and they had attracted an innovation grant to set up an independent apartment living program that allowed people with mild handicaps to graduate from group home living. They could be proud of their good reputation for providing an innovative, well managed alternative to institutionalization.

The self-evaluation method was simple: managers and staff took time to listen carefully to what the people who lived with them said about the quality of their lives and questioned themselves closely about the implications of what they heard. Sandy Landis, a leader in this process, sums up the result,

*"It was bad news. The better we learned to listen to the people we serve the more clearly we heard them say, '**It's not working for us. We don't like where we are living and we don't like the group of people we are living with.**' It smashed us. We had a clear mission and were working very hard, we liked the people we served and they liked us, but what we were doing didn't really fit their needs."*

Acting responsibly on this bad news has renewed Residential, Inc.

*New Vision*

Constructive action began as the Residential, Inc.'s leaders embraced some sobering realities and made clear commitments to the people who rely on them for assistance. Institutionalization has destroyed family ties for most people who rely on the agency, many now have no one else to count on, celebrate with, or come to their funerals, so we have to be a family for people and help them build relationships outside the agency. Most people will need a good deal of assistance for years to come, so we make a life-long commitment to people. People aren't where they want to be, so we will focus resources on people one by one rather than on the operation of group settings. Short term thinking about next years behavioral objectives won't create what people deserve, so we will become future thinkers and help each person develop a personal long range plan and the means to follow it. These are grave responsibilities, so we must remain self-critical and widen the agency's leadership base by building our own skills and by making stronger individual and agency ties to the community. We have so much to learn about fulfilling these responsibilities to those we serve now that it would be a mistake to grow larger. Other people who deserve a community residence will have to look to another provider.

To better understand these commitments, the whole staff spent time defining their quality standard: what do we believe would be good enough for the people we serve? After talking at length about what makes their own lives good, staff decided that everyone is an expert on quality of life and that the same standard applies to everyone, regardless of disability. Residential, Inc. determined to focus its energies on learning to assist people in five areas that make a difference to quality of life:

- **Home:** the choice of people to live with and a secure place of one's own to live.
- **Relationships:** people to count on, people to share with, people to do things with.
- **Opportunities** to educate one's self, learn and grow.
- **Money:** assets, possessions, and equity.
- **Status and a positive reputation** in the small, close knit city people live in.

Staff are confident that they can make clear judgements about the consistency between the quality standard and agency policy and practice. One staff member observes, "It's easy to see what fits and what doesn't. We won't get trapped again in the search for the good group home. What's hard is facing how far we still have to go and figuring out how to take the next step forward."

Renewed commitment and a clear standard of quality are the foundation of a new organizational vision, which is summarized in the current mission statement: "to stand with, support, and represent the interests of the people with whom we affiliate as they gain and maintain respected citizenship in Perry County." For most people this mission means moving into one's own home with the assets and supports to live there comfortably and securely.

*A New Social Architecture*

**Pursuit of this mission has created a new social architecture. John Winnenberg, Executive Director since the agency's beginning, describes the change like this.**

*We were set up to run good group homes. Our structure was a traditional pyramid with me on the top. Three three college educated people supervised the work of direct service staff. Our management team had professional knowledge and put a lot of energy into going away to training and bringing back new ideas to try. We developed policies and individual plans and monitored others with less education, status, and pay in implementing them. Unless there was a serious problem, I had little direct contact with the people we served and only occasional contact with direct service workers. The management team was well intentioned, respectful, and concerned about staff and residents but the problems that developed as we tried to work on our new focus showed us that our organization was shaped all wrong for what we wanted to do.*

*We turned the pyramid on its side. We talked with the people we serve and asked them which staff person they felt close to and we talked to staff and asked them which person they wanted to represent. Most staff took responsibility for being a person's service planner and everyone ended up with a service planner they chose. The service planner's job is to get to know the person and his interests better as time goes by, to help the person expand his closeness circle by reconnecting with family members and by connecting with unpaid community members, to spend time with the person and others who are close asking and thinking about the future, to write annual and quarterly individual plans, to back the person up in difficult times, and to provide some of the day-to-day assistance the person needs. We decreased the*

number of supervisors and increased the pay direct service staff could earn for accepting new responsibilities.

*My job changed dramatically as I became the back-up and support person for the service planners. It's up to me to find the resources and make decisions so the relationships work between service planners, the people they serve, and the rest of the staff a person needs. I spend my time teaching direct service staff, encouraging people to dream specific, vivid dreams about their future, thinking about how the community I grew up in can help individual dreams come true, and talking to the board and to the state and county agencies that fund and monitor us about how they can help specific people attain their objectives. Day to day responsibility for the business end of the agency became the job of the Assistant Executive Director.*

Some staff have found the increased responsibility and especially our commitment to self-criticism more than they wanted to deal with. But morale is good and turn-over is low in comparison to other agencies (60% of the staff who were involved in the reorganization three years ago are still at work).

As staff have learned more we have moved more responsibility and more opportunities for earning to them. The Assistant Executive Director has just moved on to found another agency and instead of replacing him we are dividing up his tasks and moving them out to other staff. And soon I will be sharing back-up and support responsibilities with two of our most effective service planners."

#### *Renegotiating Position*

Gathering the resources to accomplish its mission calls for the agency to re-negotiate its position in the local community, in relationship to people's families, and in the mental retardation service system. This is now the biggest challenge to Residential, Inc.'s leadership.

To operate good group homes, an agency needs community tolerance for site selection decisions and rejoices at occasional neighborly acts, volunteer involvement, and political support for expanded budgets. To assist people who want to participate in community life and become home owners, Residential, Inc. needs much more from the local community. Staff and board members have to make and show people the way to make many connections with local people, activities, and associations. The agency shifts from an occasional, well financed consumer in the local real estate market to one of the architects of new financial arrangements for assisting people without much money to

own homes. It moves from being receiver of contributions to being a thoughtful contributor to local efforts aimed at overcoming discouraging economic conditions.

Families have been encouraged to trust, support, and cooperate with service staff and look to the state to provide. Some families have become discouraged and lost touch with their relatives. A number of service planners are locating missing family members, reacquainting people who have long been out of touch, and working with family members who want to assist their relatives to attain their goals.

The most problematic relationship is with the larger service system. Residential, Inc. depends almost completely on a state agency (the Ohio Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities) for the authority to operate and for the funds to acquire property and provide services. State law requires eligible people to give up most of their assets and income in return for services. People who are almost ready to graduate to a situation that offers much less service can retain their income for a time in preparation for the move. Relationships between a person and the residential service she relies on are formalized by a regulations and monitored by an external case manager. A person who needs as much staff time as the people Residential Inc. serves who moves into her own apartment has to have that apartment licensed as a facility. Many people are under the guardianship of a statewide agency. State funds were granted to Residential, Inc. to buy houses based on an assumption of forty years use for mental retardation services and some system administrators are concerned about underutilization as people move out and "beds become vacant."

The social architecture of the system is now as poorly suited to Residential, Inc.'s mission and commitments as the agency's internal structure used to be. State wide trends –greater central authority, tighter managerial and programmatic controls to insure fiscal responsibility and protect the right to treatment, and a substantial increase in the number of "community beds" funded with Medicaid – make it unlikely that the whole system will shift in Residential, Inc.'s direction in the short run. The best option is to build on the agency's good reputation for innovation to position it as a demonstration of new service options.

Agency leaders would prefer to devote all of their resources to support the new mission and are now discussing a plan to convert existing investments with the state department. Until the larger system shifts, Residential, Inc.'s strategy for dealing with the misalignment between system structures and its mission is a balance of three sometimes conflicting streams of activity: maintenance and reform of the old; preparing for the new; and learning by doing new things.

## *New Learning*

Residential, Inc.'s leaders have not waited to gather enough power, permission and money to implement change for everyone. Instead they have been learning by acting within existing authority and funds to find and take many smaller opportunities to enhance the quality standard for particular people. Everyone lives with fewer people and has a future plan that specifies what it will take for her to live well in her own place. Everyone is much better known personally to at least one staff person, a number of people have reconnected with their family, and others have developed new relationships with people in the community. Almost everyone has more assets than they did three years ago. Nine people have moved into places they hold in their own name and three more await system approval to move.

The three biggest remaining barriers to home ownership for several people are 1. the likelihood that their homes would be forfeit because of their need for paid assistance; 2. their need for more intensive assistance than the system is set up to provide outside of group homes or Intermediate-Care-Facilities; 3. most important, the agency's lack of flexibility to align existing resources with a person's plan.

Staff have new competencies and more responsible, interesting, and flexible jobs. They have collaborated in designing an effective individual service planning process, conducted two sophisticated program self-evaluations, designed and implemented individual development plans for themselves, discovered much more about their community, learned how to find room to move while complying with complicated regulations, and developed many skills for dealing with a wide variety of people. Most of them have also come to know people with handicaps better and many agree with a service planner who said, "It sounds kind of funny to say it, but my relationship with the person I work with has taught me a lot about life. I feel a little bit wiser because I've known him."

Another service planner identifies the formula for individual and organizational learning,

*We make a lot of mistakes around here because we are trying to do new things. Finding new ways to do things is valued around here. People in charge will think with you and help you out if you want them to, but they don't second guess you about the details. As long as we stand with the person we're serving and work toward the quality standard, we won't get hassled or punished if things don't turn out as planned.*

Some of the lessons of the last two years have been very hard. Three people have been waiting for a long time to move into their own places because necessary state approvals have been slow in coming and the agency is close to the limit of the financial risk it can underwrite. Two people are now living in institutions because Residential, Inc. ran out of flexibility and staff time to provide the intensive, day by day assistance required by a person with a degenerating neurological disease and a person with an acute mental disorder. Once people have been transferred by the service system to the institutions that system managers say have the resources to provide for them, they lose eligibility and Residential, Inc. loses formal standing in decision making about their future. Both of these women enjoy un-reimbursed, regular, continuing contact with people from the agency. But these situations teach sobering lessons about the fallibilities threatening even the best intended commitments.

These hard lessons are as much a part of the agency's life as its many accomplishments. As staff members said during a recent agency planning meeting,

*Hard work and clear goals sometimes aren't enough. We've asked some people to wait for what they deserve longer than they have been able to bear. No matter how hard we worked, no matter how many extra unpaid hours, two people have been lost to us." and "It is very hard to face how much control is out of our hands. George and Albert want to move and we are ready to help them move but the state is in control and they move so very slowly.*

While the causes of these concerns can't be managed away, leaders who seriously consider their fallibility as they engage in action will be stronger. Their actions will be rooted in a deepening appreciation of the situation of the people they assist. Less energy will be wasted in denial and a search for perfect solutions and more energy will be focused on mutual support and learning.

The key to constructive action in Residential Inc.'s situation was identified during an agency planning meeting by a man who has spent many of his sixty-seven years in institutions. He has lived with the agency through changes that have assisted him to live successfully in his own apartment and find a valued place in many agency and community activities. He listened to a summary of the discussion of the threats, opportunities, and options facing the agency and then made his contribution,

*Put courage up on that list. This is all too hard to even start to do without courage. And we need each other too. We can't do it without each other.*

## **Revising Assumptions**

Organizations shape what their occupants notice as important, what they talk about, how they interpret situations, what they define as opportunities, errors, or problems, how they deal with the problems they see, and their menu of solutions (Weick, 1985). Bringing unstated organizational assumptions up for discussion is an important part of good planning (Finney & Mitroff, 1986) and testing the validity of limiting assumptions by purposefully trying alternatives based on different assumptions is an important way to develop new competency. An organization's leadership is tested when reconsidering a key limiting assumption that would define much of its unquestioned routine as producing errors.

Beta Hostels assists twenty seven people with moderate and severe handicaps to live in thirteen apartments in Attleboro, Massachusetts, A strong commitment to the principle of normalization, rigorous and regular external evaluations of agency performance, major investment in staff development and renewal, and strong initiative in planning and changing agency structures took Beta from operating group homes to supporting people in their own apartments. In 1983, Beta staff and friends could reflect on a decade or real progress.

Their reflections provided time to share a common but peripheral concern. Despite the very high value Beta places on personal social integration, most of the people Beta supports have very few close relationships and virtually no close relationships with non-disabled, unpaid people who are not family members. Extended discussion of this fact surfaced four unexamined, limiting assumptions. 1. If Beta breaks down the barriers to community presence so that one, two, or three people at the most live in ordinary apartments and use public transit, local doctors and dentists, and local recreation opportunities, then people will make friends with ordinary people naturally. 2. Beta's main role in relationship building is to support the person with a handicap, and if necessary to help her to change. 3. There are mysterious skills in helping people with handicaps form relationships and none of the Beta staff have them or no how to get them. 4. Beta as an agency and most of its staff are justified in holding low expectations and disdain for most ordinary people in the community. The agency has better values, more skill, and deeper commitment than ordinary people could. Staff have nothing to gain personally from greater involvement in community affairs.

The entire area of personal relationship had not been the subject of disciplined discussion or action. The first assumption was usually justified by reference to a very few people Beta supports who did make friends on their own. A closer look showed

that each of them hold regular jobs –something which the larger system is unlikely to support for everyone no matter how much they and Beta might want it– and each has a gift for meeting people which many others, including some staff, have not developed. The second, third, and fourth assumptions were usually covered up by the first. The fourth assumption was unspoken and had to be constructed by asking "What assumption does our behavior express about the community?"

Surfacing these assumptions by no means invalidated Beta's previous achievements, but it confronted staff with an important area of ignorance created and hidden by organizational routine. It defined a new class of routine errors of omission: everyone knew relationships were important, but other things came first in everyone's daily schedule. Embracing and learning from this collective ignorance began a continuing cycle of development for Beta.

The agency decided that instead of standing beside people with handicaps waiting for relationships to happen, it should build stronger ties to the local community and invest in systematic ways to invite and support community members to form and sustain relationships. As they thought about how best to do this they came to terms with their own limitations. Their personal disconnection from ordinary people and community events made them uninformed about where there were opportunities for relationships to develop and awkward about approaching strangers to ask for personal involvement. Their role as professional service workers and daily assistants is not incompatible with a close personal relationship, but relationships with staff can't be the same as those which are freely given. Acceptance of these limitations led to a clear new direction: Beta will support stronger involvement in the local community by the people it serves and by its staff.

The first action to implement this new direction was the creation of the volunteer program, a distinct part of the agency with the mission of inviting people into relationships and supporting their involvement with one another. Beta found funding outside the mental retardation services system to hire a very capable volunteer coordinator. She has limited human service experience and strong local connections: she grew up and raised a family in Attleboro and is involved in more than twenty local groups and associations. She has learned to use her knowledge of community members and her growing knowledge of the people Beta serves to invite people into relationships based on mutual interests and to support them as the relationships grow and meet difficult times.

The volunteer program has made an important contribution to the people Beta supports. At present, there are fifty three volunteers. Twelve people have more than one relationship and one man, who needs extra personal support because of steadily worsening symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease, has five relationships because of the volunteer program. Twenty relationships have lasted since the program started in 1983 and 41 are over one year old. According to the people involved, these relationships have various good effects. People have new and different activities, visits and meals in one another's homes, someone to call on the phone with problems or good news or just to talk, another person to share holidays and special occasions with, advice and help with personal problems, and someone to count on when things are difficult. In addition, some of the people with handicaps have specifically benefitted from a sense of belonging in someone's family, job leads, and someone to advocate for their interests with the service system and Beta itself.

Beta staff have had a number of opportunities to clarify their beliefs about the meaning and value of friendships. In dealing with a number of problems the volunteer program has created, staff have come to see relationships as ends in themselves, not as means to get something done. So volunteers don't assume staff functions, staff do not attempt to change peoples behavior by restricting contacts or arranging rewards in the context of relationships, and Beta has a policy of not hiring anyone who is involved in the volunteer program.

In a new emphasis, the coordinator recruits community association leaders to sponsor people to join their association. A person with an interest in the environment joins other volunteers in the local environmental action group's recycling operation. A man with a gift for cooking gives his Saturdays to a local church's effort to feed hungry people. A man with a desire to help young people is an assistant scout master for a large, active troop.

Relationships take many forms and each is valued in itself. People are as fallible in voluntary relationship as they are in paid ones. There have been missed connections, misunderstandings, arguments, and disappointments on both sides. But community grows as people struggle with their limitations together instead of giving them away to professionals for repair.

The volunteer program is not all Beta can do to build bridges between the people who rely on it and their community. It has been a powerful way to test and disprove limiting assumptions through action.

## **Designing a New Response**

The quality of vision, the design of social architecture, the strategy for organizational position, and the extent of learning are shaped by the character of response to ignorance, error, and fallibility (Korten, 1984). Maladaptive responses share the conviction that knowledge is no problem if only there is sufficient money and professional talent. Positive responses recognize that much relevant knowledge must be created and emphasize learning through action and reflection.

*Self-deceiving organizations* avoid noticing ignorance, error, and fallibility. Professional accounts of client deficiencies provide a scientific diagnosis of need and a prescription for appropriate treatment. Modern management techniques insure that things are done efficiently. The organization proclaims to all, "We already know how; we can do it!" If there are apparent failures, the solution lies in focusing resources on clients who are more likely to benefit and in aggressively seeking more money, more authority, more professional staff, and further scientific research. People with severe handicaps and the bearers of bad news are ignored, punished, and eliminated.

*Self-defeating organizations* wallow in error and fallibility but assign responsibility for constructive action somewhere else. Enlightened custodialism is the only realistic expectation for people who are severely handicapped. Advocates who insist on a higher standard only make an impossible job harder. It makes no sense to plan because those who control resources have no interest in providing the massive amounts of funds necessary to offer the enriched environment that represents the highest reasonable aspiration. When prodded to say anything, the organization mumbles, "We know what realistically can be done, but they won't let us do it. So why bother?" People with severe handicaps are contained, tolerated, and blamed to justify unacceptable treatment. Dissenters are ejected.

A *learning organization* defines itself as responsible to use whatever resources and opportunities are available to decrease ignorance, learn from error, and safeguard people who are especially vulnerable to fallibility. Beyond recognition that people with severe handicaps are very likely to need extra assistance all their lives, prediction and prescription are chancy. Knowledge about how to provide effective assistance is increasing at a rapid rate (Horner, Meyer, & Fredricks, 1986), so a learning organization reaches out to learn more effective ways to work. People with severe handicaps change in important and unpredictable ways in new settings with better supports, so a learning organization gets to know a person in ordinary community settings and invests in

developing new supports as people change. The learning organization's message is, *We don't know all we need to, but we are responsible for finding out. How can you help?* There is a strong commitment to standing by people when things are most difficult and an unwillingness to cover up ignorance or error by blaming a person for the consequences of his handicap. Leaders work to build an organizational climate that accepts news of errors and mistaken assumptions and supports corrective changes in mission, social architecture, and position.

Options for Individuals was founded in 1984 in Louisville to provide a day service to twenty-three people with severe handicaps and very few successful service experiences. Its beginnings exemplify the formation of a learning organization.

They set the agency's direction by making clear commitments based on their understanding of people's situation. Though most people live with their families, they are isolated and need personal connections in their neighborhood and in the larger community. The most effective ways to make these connections is to provide people opportunities and support to occupy typical adult roles within their homes and in ordinary work, leisure, and other community settings. This is challenging because of people's lack of life experience, the extent of their handicaps, and negative attitudes which reinforce low, age-inappropriate expectations. People and their families have mostly had negative experiences with human services. They have been ignored, excluded, and rejected because they were unable to meet service providers expectations. It is therefore understandable that people and their families would be slow to trust a new agency. It is important for Options to deserve trust from people and their families, to stand by its commitments to people, and not to add another rejection in their lives.

Commitments were clear from the beginning but the program's design was not. The founders were familiar with a number of recently developed model programs for severely handicapped adults but they were unwilling to select one approach for all twenty three people. They realized how little they or even people's families knew about each person's unique interests and possibilities. Treated as a group only their most obvious individual differences were apparent: some people can walk, others can't; some people can use their hands, others can't; some people have a few words, other have none; some people do disturbing and unusual things, others do not. Past assessments only offer a variety of professional labels for these personal challenges (most prefixed with "severe" or "profound").

Taking their ignorance of people's identities seriously created anxiety. Both of the founders are experienced professionals who value their management and program skills.

Opening an agency without having all the program details under careful control was most unlike them. But they realized that people will rely on Options for a long time and it seemed wrong to specify the details of a program for people they hardly knew.

It seemed right to devote the initial months of program operation to discovering more about people's interests and preferences. So they created an action learning process that began with the assignment of newly recruited direct service workers to a small group of people. The staff schedule was organized to allow each staff person several long periods of individual or one-to-two time each week. The task was to introduce the person to a variety of home and community experiences, get to know the person as well as possible, and identify at least one real interest the person has which could become the basis for developing an ongoing community work experience. Staff met regularly with agency leaders (daily at first) to share what they were learning, identify things that were working and things that were unsuccessful, and support one another. Leaders also spent time with people and their families and provided hands on, person specific training and assistance as staff needed it.

The rest of people's program week was spent in activities with a group of five or six. As many of these activities as possible were in community settings. For example, Options arranged downtown health club memberships for almost everyone. This provides exercise, a chance to be around a variety of people, and a good setting to work on physical and occupational therapy goals.

This blend of new employee orientation, staff training, individual program planning, and program design gave the people who rely on the program an unusually large influence over the program. A staff member comments,

*I came here with no previous experience. I didn't learn about severe handicaps, I met Eva and Theresa and they taught me about themselves. The more new things we do together, the more I learn about them. I still don't know if I know much about mental retardation. But I sure have learned to do a lot of exciting things with the people I've gotten to know.*

When a staff member felt she had identified a strong personal interest, the program director and the staff member found community settings where the person can pursue his interests. This was the most relevant possible staff development for direct service workers and the program director. They learned how to approach people and ask them to make room for a person with a handicap a few hours a week. They learned how to design assistance based on the characteristics of the person with a handicap and the concerns of the people in the setting. They struggled with basic questions that remain

central to Options search for effectiveness. How much assistance is enough? What is reasonable to expect from ordinary people and settings? How do we decide if a community experience is good enough? How do we decide if a person who learns very slowly is learning enough? When is it time for us to leave?

This willingness to embrace ignorance and learn from errors as they emerge has had good results. Here are two examples from a description of Options written by the program director after about a year of work (Bartholomew, 1985):

*"Greg is a man in his mid-twenties. His one great love is music, especially gospel music. Greg is very shy and although he stutters when he talks, we have found that he can sing along with gospel tunes. We contacted a local gospel radio station and now Greg goes to the station several times a week to do odd jobs, hang out, and listen to music. He is accompanied by one of our staff who is supporting a growing relationship between Greg and the employees of WDGS. We envision Greg associating with a goispel choir; traveling and maybe singing. The people at the radio station care about Greg and we plan to reduce our presence there soon.*

*...Eva, a woman thirty-three years old, began volunteering her time dishwashing at a local diner. Eva is accompanied by one of our staff because of her fear of new situations and her tendency to have tantrums when she is unhappy. Although Eva works at Frieda's diner clearing tables and washing dishes, we have focused primarily on Eva's feeling comfortable, and on nurturing an understanding relationship between Eva and Frieda. Frieda's diner is a small 'down home' place. Its a place where women come in each afternoon to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes and talk about their life. Eva spends most of her time as a part of this informal association of women. Over the past nine months, they have become very comfortable with Eva and Eva with them. Eva doesn't talk but Jennifer (our staff member) has helped Frieda and the other women develop a better understanding of Eva and her ways.*

*We haven't changed Eva. She still has tantrums and in fact, has had a couple at Frieda's. But Frieda hasn't asked her to leave. Instead, she has tried to understand her more. Last week, our staff member mentioned that we were starting to wonder if staff presence was necessary and Frieda suggested that Eva start coming by herself. She said that she thought Eva trusted her now.*

*...In time we know she will go every afternoon by herself... [But this will not be because we have made her "independent] Eva is not independent. She stays at*

*Frieda's without a paid service **worker because she can depend on the other people there.***

The overall success of this foundation phase can also be measured by the problems it creates. As unique people emerge from beneath layers of labels, and as staff become more skillful at developing community opportunities the commitment to individualization becomes increasingly meaningful and the portion of program time that people spend in groups becomes less and less relevant. How much can Options differentiate its resources to support people people with different interests in a variety of places at different times? As people begin to fit in to places like WDGS and Frieda's Diner, how will the agency decide when a person begins to work, deserve wages, and lose eligibility for the Option's program (not because of the amount of earnings, but because he would no longer "need day habilitation" if he were capable of "pre-vocational activity"). The local supported work initiative lacks the resources to serve people who learn as slowly as the people at Options have so far. Should Options try to open a supported work program of its own? How can Options be more effective for people whose physical disabilities require continuous attendant care? How can Options support people in becoming members of community associations like churches and civic clubs? How can Options work with families to help them recognize and support the changes in their relatives? How can Options survive as it evolves into a shape that fits people's interests better and better and state and federal funders ideas of what constitutes "active treatment" less and less well? Leaders ability to manage all of these question marks will decide whether a positive future follows a promising beginning.

### **Some Implications for Practice**

Each of the efforts described here is small, fragile, and incomplete. What can they contribute to advocates and decision makers whose concern is with justice for tens of thousands of people? They can't contribute big answers or even replicable models that can be mass produced to add up to big answers. They can contribute to foresight by surfacing and working on issues that are hard to see or evaluate properly from a broader, more distant vantage. They can be an early warning of negative effects of well designed policies. They can teach a good deal about what it takes to realize the promise of the Community Imperative at the local level. They can be a good example of the confidence to face and learn from ignorance, error, and fallibility.

### *Leading Issues and Early Warnings*

In all three cases leaders are occupied in re-directing the resources they can control into personalized supports that allow people to discover and amplify their interests. The shift from serving people in our group home or day program to supporting people in their own homes and community settings of their choice turns the social architecture of programs inside out. At least four leading issues surface as people work to make this basic shift.

**Personal relationships**, including relationships with extended family members and unpaid, non-handicapped people, fulfill the desires of people's hearts and strengthen people's sense of their own interests. But it seems difficult to make room for these relationships in professionally dominated environments. And there is no task analysis for their production. As relationships become important, the personal local connections of agency leaders and staff become central. Rich connections to local associations and personal networks offer the only way to expanded opportunity for people disconnected by generations of prejudiced avoidance.

**Poverty** . Policies which bundle all necessary supports together into total packages and determine eligibility for any by eligibility for all disadvantage people with long term needs for some assistance. People are made poorer when eligibility for needed services requires spending down or confiscation of assets in return for service. The status and benefits of home ownership are within the reach of many severely hadicapped people, even within existing levels of entitlements, if individually necessary services can be added on. The status and benefits of at least part time work are within the reach of many people, if reasonable support and incentives are available long term. People can easily outgrow their need for service settings if they don't have to give up necessary supports.

**Rights**. Many well formed measures to protect the rights of people who are vulnerable to abuse have negative effects when they are administered bureaucratically on a large scale. The guarantee of "active treatment" becomes a straightjacket when it comes to mean spending all day inside a service building under professional supervision working on deficit focused behavioral goals. Concern for confidentiality becomes perverse when staff are cited for introducing a person to a neighbor without documenting a release of information. Insuring safe premises becomes a millstone when people must wait for months to move into the apartment they have leased while it is licensed as a mental retardation facility. Independent case management powers and guardianship cause confusion when people who spend relatively little time with a person have the power to

move a person who has come upon hard times away from an agency with a strong commitment to support him into a "more appropriate level of care".

The long history and wide practice of neglect and abuse of people with handicaps makes this a dilemma. Every example I can give of negative effects can be countered with many examples of bad or silly practice. The only way through the dilemma is sober discussion and deliberate experimentation with answers to this question: "What local conditions – including governance, community involvement, safeguards, and record of performance– would allow us to exempt a program from routine, detailed scrutiny by central authority? What assurances would insure central authority that things are not deteriorating?"

**System design.** All three local innovators pose problems in the system they depend on for resources. They stretch every loophole in their drive for flexibility. They interpret people's needs in idiosyncratic ways. They are critical of themselves and of other providers and they often are in conflict with other local providers. They frequently break rules. They increase variety and risk. They do their paperwork well, but there is the constant suspicion that more is going on than shows up in their documentation. They pose system leaders these basic questions, "How do I know which of these troublesome, incomplete, risky projects to protect?" "How can I best use the relatively little flexibility I have to build new capacities and explore new issues at the local level?" "How can I influence other local programs to adopt promising directions and practices from people they may be in conflict with."

These innovators provide system managers with an early warning. Reducing the size of living arrangements and declaring supported work the policy goal are important current topics of policy debate. Programs that have made the shift to supporting people in settings of their choice can warn us that this will not be enough. Until the contract between a person who requires assistance and those who provide it is re-negotiated to increase the person's power, negative patterns won't change. Most of the issues on tomorrow's policy agenda can be identified by listening carefully to small innovators like the three introduced here.

#### *Some Lessons on What It Takes*

These three innovators share a common feature of social architecture: they treat direct service like high commitment work instead of trying to manage it like turn-of-the-century factory labor (Walton, 1985). The old-fashioned factory approach divides work into the smallest possible parts, constructs exhaustive job descriptions and policies to cover every contingency, and creates external controls to insure that workers do as they are

told. Planning and judgement are separate kinds of work: professional teams decide, service workers do. As long the job can be done by a reliable technology that can be broken into small coordinated parts, this approach has a chance of working.

High commitment work is necessary in situations where threats and opportunities to an organizations mission occur unpredictably and tasks can't be successfully pre-defined in their details. Providing direct service focused on supporting community participation for severely handicapped people is high commitment work. Staff frequently work without supervision; the stakes are high in human terms if staff exercise poor judgement; performance standards are high and complex when regulations are taken into account; the work calls for high levels of person-to-person involvement and skill at cooperating with others under what are often stressful conditions; and it takes judgement to apply most available technologies in changing individual circumstances. The distance between planning, doing, and controlling is short.

Eliciting and supporting high commitment work requires different management structures. Innovative agency leaders put time shaping and sharing a vision of a desirable future for people and their communities. Direct service workers are responsible for helping the people they serve create and move toward a personal vision. The management task is to insure alignment between agency values, individual visions, and available resources. Direct service workers participate in evaluation and planning. There is a strong commitment to staff development for everyone and people are rewarded for learning new skills, doing expanded jobs, and teaching others. Distinctions between professionally trained people and direct service workers are minimized. Organizational structures are flat, with few levels of hierarchy. There is a trend toward narrowing pay differential between direct service workers, professionals, and managers by increasing the responsibilities direct service workers assume. Women and people with limited formal education hold positions of status and responsibility. Personal knowledge and direct contact is valued, so managers and support staff spend considerable time with handicapped people. Leader's families are involved in lots of meals, celebrations, and informal activities with handicapped people. Doing all this is such a big task it is no wonder these managers believe the basic building blocks of an effective system shouldn't involve more than fifty or sixty people, counting staff and the people they serve.

## Why It Is Difficult

*There's always an easy solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and wrong.*

*-H. L. Menkin*

Human service leaders have difficulty learning from ignorance, error, and fallibility for at least three reasons. 1. Much recent progress in gaining political support for mental retardation services has come from confident assertion of solutions to outrageous insitutional conditions. 2. The implementation of these solutions has come at a time of enthusiasm for reforming public administration with a set of management tools that are ill matched to complex, ambiguous situations. 3. There is a widely held ethic of control that communicates the expectation that competent managers should be in unequivocal control of organizations that get problems solved efficiently.

### *Overconfidence as a Source of Power*

Justified, politically well directed optimism about the possibilities for prevention and amelioration of mental retardation (President's Panel on Mental Retardation, 1962; Tizard, 1964) and outrage at the abuses fundamental to institutional life (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966) combined in an era of increasing spending on human services to thaw the frozen beliefs and policies that made custodialism self-justifying. With active cooperation from professional and administrative change agents, vigorous social and legal advocates greatly accelerated funding levels and created new policies and structures embodying recognition of the human and legal rights of people with disabilities ( Kindred, et al., 1976; Rothman & Rothman, 1984).

This pattern of outrage at injustice followed by confident, expert assertion that remedies can be implemented if orders are given and money provided has been quite successful in influencing judges and somewhat successful in influencing legislators and executive decision makers. Practitioners of this strategy are understandably concerned that admissions of ignorance, error, and fallibility will dilute confidence and undermine support. But avoiding the massive error of institutionalization only creates the opportunity to face new questions and new errors. If community services are to make a real difference, their leaders must invent them out of something other than institutional patterns. This means learning new ways. Few inventions of any sort come out completely right the first time. Anything as complex and conflict ridden as the creation of a new relationship between devalued people and their communities can only evolve

from many steps forward. Some forward steps will open promising new paths, others will turn out to be dead ends.

Admitting the limits of what we know and can do, while celebrating the many advances people with handicaps are making, builds a stronger foundation for change than overconfident promises that underestimate decision makers ability to learn. Recognizing limits is not an excuse to avoid acting to develop competence but a way to define the competences we need.

*Mismatched Tools for Administrative Reform*

During the time that mental retardation services have grown, interest has spread in improving public management. Those interested in better management have adopted management by objectives, long range planning, the rational design and reorganization of systems to achieve coordination and efficiency, and the creation of data bases to support quantitative analyses, among other things. Most of these reforms have had disappointing effects because they are poorly suited to the management of complex situations where there are conflicting interests and no technology sufficient to reliably produce desired outcomes. (see Downs & Larkey, 1986 for an overall assessment these reforms).

These techniques have been accepted as the right way to do things by service leaders and many advocates. On their advice, legal reforms and judicial remedies often call for comprehensive plans, detailed controls of agency behavior, extensive interagency coordination mechanisms, elaborate project designs which may require the on-time implementation of hundreds of precisely defined objectives which are only achievable if the proposed coordination mechanisms works flawlessly, and frequent calls for more numbers as proof of need, proof of accomplishment, and justification of merit.

Whatever good they may do, these management techniques are very costly in their potential for misdirecting attention. Each of them creates hundreds of new errors as managers try to fit their operations into someone else's idea of the way things should be done. When system monitors discover problems they often notice coincidentally that things are not being managed as they assume they should be. Decision makers who hear little of the people who actually develop and deliver service besides their persistent inability to get the forms and the numbers right lose confidence in their ability. This leads to stronger central authority, elaboration of rules and controls, and the provision of technical assistance. These costs are justified if repairing errors in management technique proves the key to effective performance. But if the link between technique and performance is weak, decision makers will feel like the frustrated viewer who has just

discovered that a sixty channel cable hook-up still offers nothing he wants to watch. The temptation to pay more to add a few more channels is great, but the solution isn't in the way the wires are connected in the box. The solution lies in creating alternative pursuits.

### *The Ethic of Control*

The struggle to learn the lessons taught by ignorance, error, and fallibility extends beyond public management into basic notions of how things get done. The world that most people see has been shaped by the notion that all things are controllable if the right person is in charge, if problems are broken up into manageable bits, and if sufficient authority and money are available. The measure of human effectiveness and worth is the capacity to use better and better information to efficiently achieve better and better results (Michael, 1983).

Viewed from the perspective of people with severe handicaps the world is a less orderly, uncontrollable place. Its limits are more obvious, its errors more easily felt. Big plans more often go awry and promises are more easily forgotten. Perhaps this is because a severely handicapped person does poorly on conventional measures of the worth of human capital. In terms of the ethic of control, her deficiencies are valuable because they create service work, but her unique assets are irrelevant because they create problems rather than solving them. For all of that, many people with severe handicaps deal with the fallibilities of their uncontrollable world with grace and courage when offered the support of personal relationships and a bit of practical help. Their example and their experience can be a gift to us if we let it be (Vanier, 1979).

Like other counterperspectives on the world –those of women and economically oppressed people for example– the experiences of people with severe handicaps challenge the basic notion that everything is controllable and the challenge is often met with redoubled effort to increase control. We promise to prevent, we promise to cure, we promise to rehabilitate, we promise to make independence as if it were a Chevrolet. And our promises have been fruitful, up to a point. If we are to move beyond that point we need the courage and the grace to learn the lessons of our collective ignorance and fallibility. There is much to learn in close attention to our errors and failings as we work to share and improve the lives of people with handicaps.

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