

The challenge of institutional “milieu” to cross-systems integration

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In the Summer 2004 issue of *Focus*, Jodi Sandfort addressed the recurring question—“Why is human services integration so difficult to achieve?” She pointed out that integrated service models are, by their very nature, complex, and that “the ‘core technologies’ of such human service organizations cannot be easily standardized.” Rather, the technology of collaborative initiatives, especially those that blend existing, categorical programs, demands that main activities and tasks be “negotiated afresh in the daily interactions between front-line workers and clients.”¹

The ambitious integrated service models now being developed typically require flexible responses to the changing and unpredictable needs of families with multiple challenges. Prescribed rules and by-the-book answers are less useful than professional norms in guiding workers’ actions, developing appropriate routines, and assessing strategies to meet continuously evolving management or service challenges.

Mandated collaboration, says Sandfort, even when it is accompanied by conventional strategies for cross-training and by better communication, may not be sufficient. She concludes, “managers will be able to accomplish better, more integrated service delivery only by understanding how to shape the deeper structures in human service organizations that determine or constrain action.” We argue in this article that cross-systems integration demands a more profound awareness of the deeper structures of organizational life—an organization’s “milieu”—than is generally recognized.

Institutional milieu—what is it?

Basically, the “milieu” of an institution or organization is a shorthand term for the underlying norms, values, and behavioral patterns that shape the way the agency functions and makes decisions. What kinds of people are

recruited for key positions? How are they trained? How much latitude to make decisions and exercise discretion is given line staff or front-line managers? What staff behaviors are recognized and rewarded? How clearly are organizational mission and values articulated, and how fully are they embraced by the workforce? These are only a few items in a very long list. Like a societal milieu, the institutional variant encompasses the norms and values that guide how the members of an organization are expected to think and act and, by extension, how customers and the community view the program or agency.

One correlate of an institution’s milieu is its “core technology,” the activities or functions it performs. For example, does a program (or agency) primarily issue benefits, deliver a routinized service, or intervene in families to remedy problems or transform behaviors? These fundamentally different kinds of tasks—fully routinized, partially routinized, and nonroutinized systems—shape different types of organizational milieus.

Benefits-issuing programs such as Food Stamps or housing subsidies typically involve repeated and routine tasks performed within a strict regulatory environment. Determining who is eligible and calculating what benefits families ought to receive may be complex but requires little discretion. Good workers execute the rules invariantly and with precision. Not surprisingly, the dominant milieu in such programs is a top-down management style, and conformity to rules is a prized organizational attribute. Let us call such programs or agencies *fully routinized* systems.

This is the fifth article in an intermittent *Focus* series discussing integration of human services systems. Earlier articles are:

The service integration agenda: Political, conceptual, and methodological challenges—Thomas Corbett and Jennifer L. Noyes (Vol. 22:3, Summer 2003)

Building comprehensive human service systems—Mark Ragan (Vol. 22:3, Summer 2003)

Service and systems integration: A collaborative project—Thomas Corbett and Jennifer L. Noyes (Vol. 23:2, Summer 2004)

The opportunities for service integration under current law—Mark Greenberg and Jennifer L. Noyes (Vol. 23:2, Summer 2004)

A number of service programs reflect some attributes of benefits-issuing agencies in that the program's products (an activity or knowledge) do not change much across consumers. Thus, there is a repetitive quality to what is done for those seeking help. But sometimes these programs require workers to exercise professional skills and discretionary judgment. A formal bureaucracy is more or less consistent with program purposes, but we would expect to see, for example, greater lateral communication (problem-solving among peers) and less formulaic rule-making. Many of the programs that became staples of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as it shifted cash welfare toward an emphasis on work fall into this category. Examples include basic skill development services, job search help, and help for TANF applicants in seeking alternatives to public assistance. Let us call these programs *partially routinized* systems.

Intervention or crisis-oriented service programs thrive in organizational milieus that deviate radically from true bureaucratic forms of organization. Each interaction between the system and the client (or customer) is likely to be unique or at least have elements of unpredictability. Service providers that deal with severe substance abuse or mental health problems, or with children spiraling toward the child welfare system, might be assigned to this final category. In the face of these challenges, formulaic rules are not particularly effective. Professional judgment and continuous adjustments and refinements of strategies for carrying out the program's core technology probably should be encouraged. In such systems, one might expect to see what are called flat hierarchies (few management levels), bottom-up decision making (in which front-line workers are empowered to shape how an agency does its business), and incentive structures that encourage innovation and flexibility in working with professionals in other organizations and systems. Let us call these *nonroutinized* systems.

Putting together programs with similar organizational milieus, although still difficult, is less daunting than blending programs or agencies drawn from different milieus. For example, integrating two benefit programs might demand changes in eligibility criteria and supportive information technologies, but the workers and supervisors in these two systems might feel relatively comfortable working together. This is not the case in pursuing integration across milieus. It has proved difficult, for example, to bring together staff and clients familiar with an institutional milieu shaped by the imperative to get a check out the door (the former AFDC system) with staff shaped by an institutional milieu that reflected different incentives, stakeholders, and protocols (the workforce development system).

It should not be inferred from this organizational typology that all fully routinized systems lack innovative or other nonbureaucratic qualities, or that all intervention or crisis-oriented programs are free of the influences of

more routinized, bureaucratic behavior. Core technology is a significant, but not the only influence an organization's milieu. Other significant drivers include public and legal scrutiny, changing political climates, and leadership. For example, there can be an emphasis on policy-driven practice and, at times, formulaic decision-making in child welfare systems because of their legalistic, high-risk, and often high-profile nature. In such cases, one might well see significant amounts of hierarchical, top-down decision making and bureaucratic structures that discourage innovation and flexibility. Moreover, some particularly innovative state welfare leaders were quite successful in recrafting their organizations' core technologies to the point where they fitted the description of a nonroutinized system. The essential point, however, remains the same: core technology is a strong factor in determining the milieu in many organizations, and the typology of fully routinized, partially routinized, and nonroutinized systems can be a useful tool in assessing existing organizational milieus as one prepares to implement cross-systems integration.

Getting to the starting point

The impetus for change in service programs is likely to be generated by a feeling that something is wrong with the current system. For example, program A and program B deal with many of the same families and should be working together. They are, however, located in different parts of the city, introducing a transaction cost for customers (getting across town). As a result, many families referred from program A to B may not show up (in program analysis terms we call this a "leakage" problem).

With the "problem" identified, it would appear relatively easy to import a solution. In this case, the answer may be collocation of services, bringing related programs and service systems under the same roof. Other examples of tactics for bringing programs together and integrating service delivery include (but certainly are not limited to) the following:

Realign governance structures—Institute common managers over programs where more collaboration is desired and/or institute mechanisms for jointly managing related programs.

Set common outcome measures—Mandate that collaborating programs adopt common program objectives, standards, and methods for measuring outcomes.

Consolidate intake—Redesign policies, procedures, and information technologies so that applicants will be considered for benefits and services in several systems through a single application process. This reduces transaction costs to the applicant and improves access to multiple systems.

Establish a team approach to case management—Service providers and professionals from several programs work together with a family that has multiple issues.

Consolidate job functions—Expand the expertise of front-line workers so that they can handle responsibilities formerly distributed among several workers.

Blend/braid funding strategies—Use funds from several programs to support service delivery.

Yet picking from a list of tactics to address an identified operational problem and imposing the new solution through mandates from the central office leads to an all too frequent scenario: in a year or so, when nothing much has changed, people start looking around for someone to blame. We believe this too common mistake of confusing means with ends happens because those seeking change do not start in the right place and fail to fully appreciate the institutional implications of the proposed changes.

Starting in the “right place”

A real-life story can show us one right place to start. In the late 1980s, officials in Kenosha County, Wisconsin, struggled as a pilot county for a new, work-oriented, welfare reform initiative. At first they referred clients to the Private Industry Council for training or labor market attachment services, but once the clients were referred, the county never knew what happened to them. No operational connection between the welfare and workforce systems existed.

The agency undertook an intensive assessment of what they needed to do to integrate the new work message into their welfare system, with assistance from researchers from IRP.² The assessment began with a simple set of questions. Who were their customers? What did their customers experience under current policies and procedures? What did they want to achieve with these customers? How would they have to transform the customer experience to achieve those outcomes? What kinds of changes in existing practice, administration, and policies would it take to achieve this transformed customer experience?

The reform process started with the simplest of exercises. Assume that you want to shift welfare from a system of giving out checks to a system that promotes work and independence. Well, what happens when an applicant walks in the front door? Literally, the Kenosha planning team sat down at a blackboard with key staff and “walked through” the customer experience, assessing how each step in the process contributed or detracted from what they wanted to achieve. They involved staff and other stakeholders in the analysis, not all of whom were willing coconspirators in the beginning. And they conducted a thorough review of their entire caseload so that they understood what customers actually experienced under ex-

isting protocols and administrative arrangements. Starting with the customer experience, they slowly reengineered their entire way of doing business to make it outcome-focused, participatory, and comprehensive. By 1990, Kenosha had opened up a one-stop Job Center that earned a national and international reputation, becoming the JOBS program of the year in 1992.

The Kenosha experience is not unique, but the agency was in many ways a pioneer in welfare reform and well illustrates steps critical to our emerging model of integration:

Start with the population of interest.

Determine what you want to accomplish.

Continuously focus on the customer’s experience in the system.

Be inclusive and participatory in the analysis and planning process.

*Think through how **all** aspects of the relevant systems affect the customer’s experience.*

Measure progress and continually adapt.

These premises also serve as the foundation of the model to which we now turn our attention. The first part of this model, developed by James Dimas and James Fong of the Casey Strategic Consulting Group with input from members of the Service Integration Network (SINNET), is illustrated in Figure 1.³ The graphic suggests that, when considering a service and systems integration project, the best place to start is with the target—a specific population and a set of goals tied to measurable outcomes such as healthy families, children ready for school, youth successfully transitioning to adulthood. Such goals are the driving force behind any systems integration vision; all else is tactics and strategy.

This point cannot be overstated. Integrating services should never be an end in itself, but rather a means to achieve better outcomes by transforming customers’ experiences through a new service delivery system and philosophy.

For example, the State of Utah, which had successfully integrated its TANF and workforce development systems starting in the late 1990s, decided that it wanted to better integrate the TANF/workforce program with social service systems that had not been part of earlier integration efforts on behalf of particularly troubled populations. Rather than throwing these large service systems together by administrative fiat, state officials selected a specific target population—youth aging out of foster care—and focused on a limited set of outcomes that, they believed, would facilitate a better transition to independent living as self-sufficient adults. This seemingly modest reform agenda already is demonstrating broader possibilities for

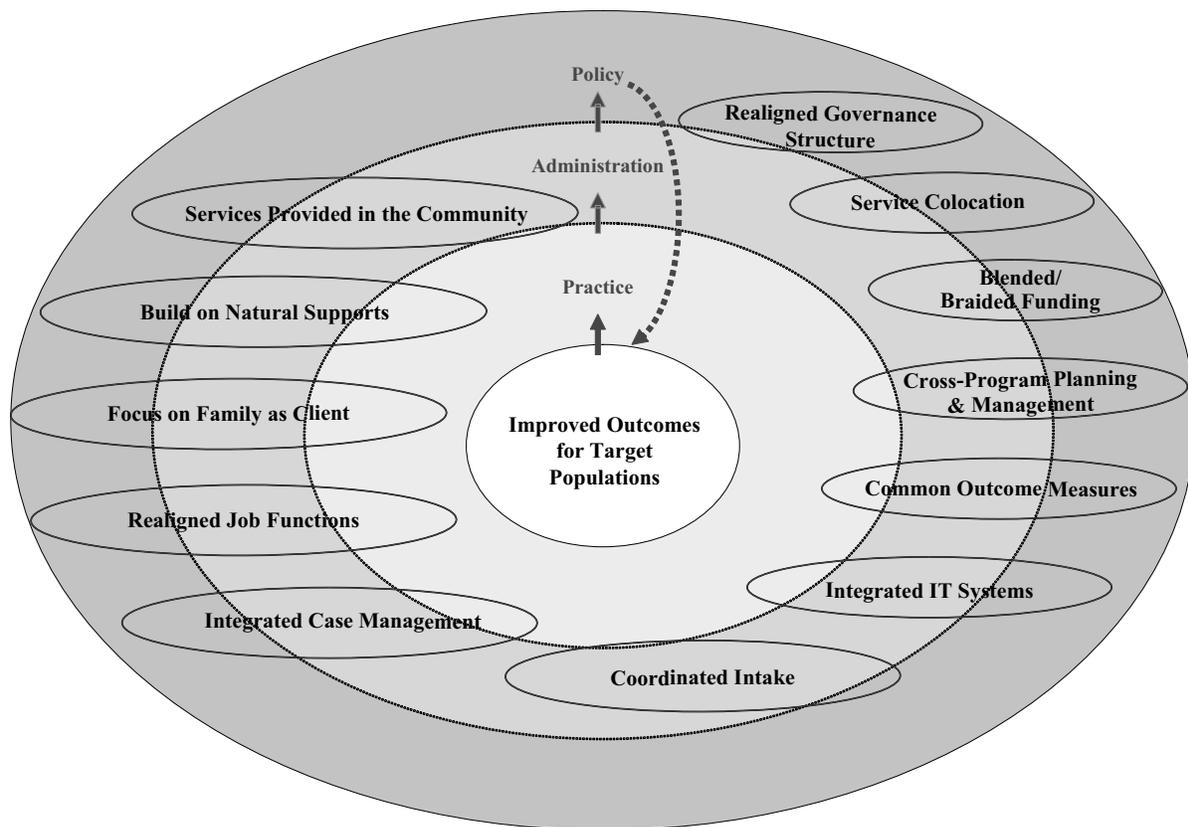


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for service integration, part 1.

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Strategic Consulting Group.

cooperation and collaboration across systems that previously were housed in separate state agencies.⁴

As with other aspects of the model, simple points can obscure important complexities. By definition, systems integration involves more than one program, organization, or system. This implies different customer foci and programmatic purposes. In the real world, what does this complexity suggest about how to think about the inner circle in Figure 1?

Suggestion 1. In getting started, consider societal outcomes that exceed the purview of existing, more narrowly focused programs. Larger goals, such as improving the proportion of children ready for school, that tend to exceed the responsibility of any one existing agency create a different dynamic.

Suggestion 2. One place to begin is with the current caseloads of the programs you think might be essential partners. How many families are being touched by different programs and agencies? The realization that programs and caseloads overlap sometimes keeps questioning partners at the table.

Suggestion 3. Existing programs often define their clients narrowly, as a child or adult “case” with a specific prob-

lem. In shifting to an integrated systems framework, it helps to conceive of cases differently, perhaps as a whole family rather than a group of individuals with different problems who happen to be related.

Figure 1 suggests a second important point. Everything else we normally associate with the design and management of social welfare systems is, in effect, supportive of the ultimate objective at the center of the concentric circles. Practice, administration, and policy must all be aligned properly if integrated service delivery is actually to be achieved. Practice can be thought of as the way various programs and systems interact with their customers and provide benefits and services to them. Administration encompasses management and the physical layout of agencies and systems. And policy encompasses the rules governing how programs are to operate and what is expected of customers.

Real life is more complicated. Policy, for example, might be further divided into internal regulations and practices (which are easier to change) and the external policy environment (rules imposed from outside the agency) which might be less susceptible to change. Still, the basic point remains the same. Starting with what you want to accomplish and for whom, you must think through what that means for how your systems interact with families, how

your administrative practices and management protocols support the new expectations, and how policies and the overall policy environment conform to the new mission.

What does this mean in reality? At one level, as in the Kenosha example, it means disaggregating the customer experience into all of its discrete parts and considering the signals or messages that members of the target population receive about the programs and the agencies through which the benefits and services are delivered. How does the system assess what customers really need; how does the customer who needs multiple services actually access that help; and how are distinct services blended into a coherent service plan? How are changes accommodated and problems addressed? How are communications and data sharing among workers handled? And finally, how is success or failure monitored and determined, especially after customers leave the system?

Another example comes from San Mateo County, California, where officials aggressively pushed service integration across a wide variety of TANF, workforce, and traditional human services. To be sure that services were accessible and that, for families with multiple challenges, they would be delivered through a single, coherent case plan, San Mateo made many changes. To make services available to vulnerable children and their families, they outstationed service providers in high-risk schools. To make case management work better, they instituted a cross-team network of service providers for consultation and problem solving. To help develop policies that cut across traditional program lines, they implemented a matrix management capacity in which area service directors also assumed responsibility for knowing about specific programs or program components. Management meetings then became opportunities for assessing how policies in one program interacted with policies in other programs.

As with Kenosha and Utah, San Mateo is not unique. But it is an excellent example of how officials thought through the implications of service integration for practice, administration, and policy.

Conceptually mapping the institutional implications of integrated services

In considering integrated services, we must think both horizontally and vertically. Thinking horizontally demands that we recognize that there is an implicit life-cycle for the relationship between a customer and a system—a sequence of events and interactions that play out over time. Proposed changes must be grounded in what the customer will experience at each stage of that hypothetical cycle (the life-cycle concept is discussed in the companion article in this *Focus*).

As one goes through this exercise, it is possible to identify key points where things will break down. For example, where coordination of selected services is a goal

but programs are in different locations, how will customers get from point A to point B? The answer is often, as previously noted, to collocate. But collocation may reduce the physical challenges to collaboration while leaving untouched other impediments to integration—professional jealousies, institutional turf issues, or differences in language and technology. Thus, it is important to consider where something can go wrong and anticipate corrective solutions.

Suggestion 4. In assessing how the creation of a new customer experience will be affected by existing practice, administration, and policy, “walking in my shoes” mental experiments can be extremely helpful. What has to change in existing practices and protocols at the interface with the customer? What changes in management practices are needed to support the practice changes? How does the physical layout have to be altered, or accounting and information technology systems updated?

Suggestion 5. In thinking through the implications of proposed changes, use focus groups, inclusionary brainstorming sessions, and any other techniques that can obtain information and creative ideas from throughout the affected programs. Through this experience, but more connections will be made and final buy-in is more likely.

Figure 1 makes another point that may not be obvious. The smaller ovals within the larger circles are the tactical solutions often employed to achieve integration. We argued above that off-the-shelf tactical solutions are unlikely to achieve the changes in deeper structures of a milieu necessary to really transform the way business is done. So we must also think vertically, examining how microprocesses or worker-customer interactions are influenced and shaped by higher-level (macro-level) institutional functions that presumably should support those interactions—management style, information technology, professional training, legal and accounting functions. If policies are not aligned, or intake staff not trained well enough, or no one can figure out how to blend resources with imagination, comprehensive services for challenged families will remain a mirage.

The iceberg model: Thinking through the meaning of institutional milieu

This brings us to the second part of the model, which demonstrates how an exploration of the deeper dimensions of institutional milieu can advance the service integration agenda. The first part of the model, illustrated in Figure 1, represents the tip of the “iceberg;” the second part of the model, illustrated in Figure 2, illustrates how many important institutional dimensions lie below the “water line.” The iceberg image illustrates a seminal insight that we have observed in working with our more ambitious and reflective “lighthouse” sites⁵—what we see

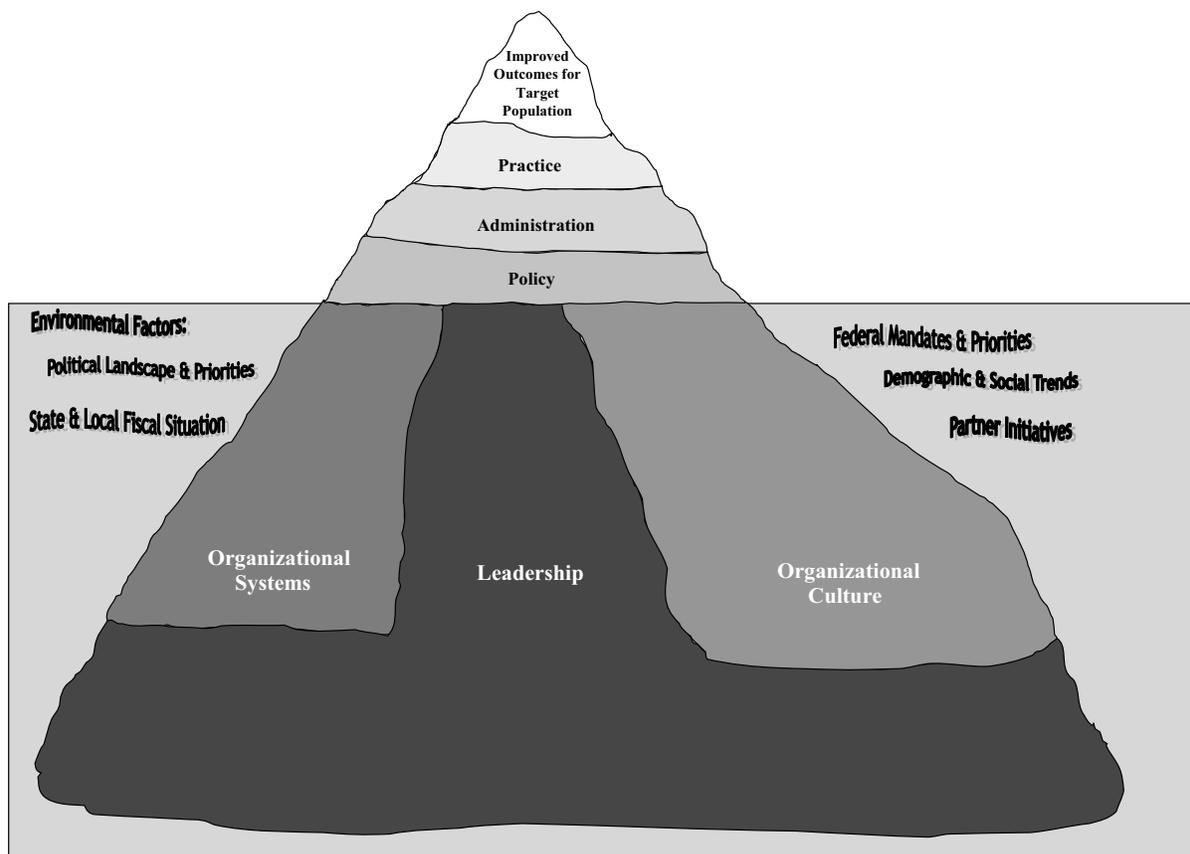


Figure 2. A conceptual framework for service integration, part 2.

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Strategic Consulting Group.

as the obvious things that must be changed when bringing “siloes” programs together do not touch upon all that is important to ultimate success.

Development of this facet of the model started by examining the common mistake we have already noted: Too many policy entrepreneurs have assumed that true integration is achieved by introducing a few of the conventional tactics and strategies associated with service integration.⁶ Starting with the question we have already considered, “What do you want to achieve and for whom?” the iceberg model offers a process for determining how the drive to integrate should shape every other dimension of an emerging system’s structure and processes or, alternatively, help identify constraints that should shape what is attempted. It pushes us to ask: “How does the underlying institutional milieu of each potential system partner fit within the proposed integrated model?”

When introducing an integrated service system, most planners are likely to think about and probably include modifications to practice protocols, administrative systems, and policies. These are the factors “above the water line,” visible to practitioners of public policy.

By focusing on these issues, however, we may miss much of what is important to the potential success of reform efforts. The iceberg model suggests that three contextual dimensions “below the water line” shape how individual organizations and systems operate, and therefore ultimately shape whether integrated service delivery will be achieved. These dimensions are *leadership style*, *organizational culture*, and *institutional systems*. They can generally be thought of as follows:

Leadership style—Who creates and articulates the vision for change? How well is it communicated, internally and with the outside world? How are responsibility and authority shared? Where do leaders look for input? How do leaders deal with impediments and obstacles, and how well do they see and exploit opportunities?

Organizational culture—How do the people in any program or agency perceive themselves and others? How do they communicate with others in their program, or others they professionally relate to, and what vocabulary do they use? What are the basic rules that govern institutional life?

Organizational systems—What infrastructural supports does a system have available to it, and how flexible and adaptive are they? How restrictive are the rules and protocols that govern the lifeblood of institutions—money and information?

The implicit message of the iceberg metaphor is simple. Each separate program that is considering collaboration must first look at what is going on below its own water line. Then some hard questions must be addressed. How well do its deep dimensions comport with what we know about pursuing systems integration?

Suggestion 6. Each individual program should go through some form of assessment. Can its core technology, the organizational tasks most closely associated with achieving the program's purposes, best be described as fully routinized, partially routinized, or nonroutinized? How is the core technology reflected in leadership style, the organization's culture, and its institutional systems?

Ideally, planners would perform a comparative analysis where the compatibility of the systems they propose to integrate is compared. Program A focuses on eligibility issues and accuracy, program B on improving family functioning. In program A, workers are punished for making mistakes; in program B they are rewarded for customer success. In A, the manual is everything. In B, managers encourage worker input.

If these systems are brought together, workers and managers are likely to be confounded by the styles of their new partners; at the worst, relations may sink into acrimony. Bringing together organizations where the fit is less than ideal may require considerable retraining of staff, or repeated sessions where staff and managers can work out differences and form new understandings. When the divide between institutional milieux is too great, perhaps functions have to be realigned or new staff brought in.

A number of years ago, officials in El Paso County, Colorado, initiated a fundamental transformation of their public assistance and child welfare systems. Their widely acclaimed reforms were based on a deceptively simple set of propositions. TANF would be reconfigured as a strategy for early detection and intervention of children (and families) at risk of entering the child welfare system. The child welfare system, in turn, would broadly be reconfigured as an antipoverty and community development strategy.

Radically changing the core technologies of the TANF and child welfare systems demanded that front-line workers of each system incorporate new skills, behaviors, and expectations. TANF workers, particularly in the early years, were little more than paper processors. Child welfare workers operated as "investigators" who were brought in long after problems had spun out of control.

Early intervention and problem prevention were concepts with which they were neither familiar nor comfortable. In the end, many of the original workers left, or were reassigned to other tasks. Ultimately, the county was able to create an institutional milieu that supported their new vision, but with considerable effort.

Knowing each program is not the same as knowing what to do with that information, nor is each deep or embedded dimension equally suitable for an integrated service model. The greatest challenge comes when systems with very different milieux are integrated, making it likely that many friction points will need to be addressed. This can also be viewed as an opportunity to create an imperative for change. Some types of leadership, organizational cultures, and institutional systems are better than others, at least when considering cross-systems innovations. We need not just leadership but a kind of *effective leadership* that has certain identifiable characteristics. All organizations have an underlying culture, but what we need is an *empowered organizational culture*. Finally, all programs have institutional systems, but what we need are *effective systems*. Effective leadership, an empowered (or empowering) culture, and dynamic systems can mean very different things to different people. In a future *Focus* article, we will take up these issues.

In sum, improving outcomes and transforming the experience of customers or target group members should be the driving vision behind any integration effort. Policy, administration, and practice are the visible levers, those parts of the iceberg that can be viewed above the waterline, to be manipulated in order to achieve that transformation. The contextual dimensions—leadership, organizational culture, and institutional systems—are the factors below the water line that support and nurture systems change. And in terms of our iceberg model, the central questions we must answer are:

1. First and most important, the pinnacle of the iceberg: "What do you want to accomplish?" Do you want to save money, improve family outcomes?
2. What sequence of steps and actions, above the water line will lead to what you want to achieve?
3. Do we have goodness of fit between your model above the water line and your institutional milieu below the water line?
4. What strategy do we need for bringing these two into some correspondence?

Why is institutional milieu so important?

We continue to pursue cross-systems integration, not because it is easy, but because it strikes so many of us as a better way to organize and deliver human services. The underlying current of the welfare reform movement over the past two decades is that helping the disadvantaged is

no longer about handing out a check. That task government knows how to do well. The emerging challenge is to change how individuals behave, how families function, and how communities afford supportive environments in which to raise healthy and productive children.

When the policy entrepreneurs in Kenosha County began to pursue their vision of reform in the late 1980s, they merely wanted to nudge welfare in the direction of encouraging work. They soon found that to do that well, they had to create a new organizational form—a one-stop Job Center that blended staff from the welfare and workforce development systems so well that traditional program distinctions evaporated. Fast forward to the White Center community in southern King County (Seattle), Washington, an area embracing many disadvantaged ethnic and immigrant communities.⁷ They also opened a one-stop human service center in the fall of 2004. But their vision of reform goes well beyond encouraging work attachment, which it does, to include a broader engagement of the entire community in transforming the environment in which resident families live.

The visions of change contemplated in the White Center community and in many other of the lighthouse sites we have visited over the past two years embrace historically ambitious agendas. To realize such visions, business as usual cannot prevail. Agency workers operating in their distinct and separate organizations cannot create the seamless and coherent service systems that will be the bedrock of future social assistance in this country. ■

Workforce Development bureaucracy and the human services bureaucracy.

⁵Lighthouse sites are local and state sites where innovative work on service integration has taken place. A number of these sites participated in meetings to share insights and problems with one another and to help those at national level to think more clearly about how best to advance this agenda.

⁶See M. Ragan, *Building Better Human Service Systems: Integrating Services for Income Support and Related Programs*, a report prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Strategic Consulting Group, June 2003.

⁷Some of the early impetus for this reform effort can be attributed to the Annie E. Casey Foundation undertaking called the *Making Connections Initiative*. This project was designed to work with selected communities to facilitate a dialogue among and within community stakeholders in order to promote and encourage community development.

¹J. Sandfort, "Why Is Human Services Integration so Difficult To Achieve?" *Focus* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 35.

²The team from the Institute for Research on Poverty included Larry Mead, Michael Wiseman, and Tom Corbett.

³SINNET is a group of individuals representing several organizations who are collaborating in efforts to advance the service integration agenda. Key members of SINNET include Tom Corbett (IRP), James Dimas and James Fong (Casey Foundation Strategic Consulting Group), Susan Golonka (NGA Center for Best Practices), Jennifer Noyes (IRP and the Hudson Institute), Mark Ragan (Rockefeller Institute of Government), and Courtney Smith (NGA Center for Best Practices). Early versions of the iceberg model were repeatedly reviewed by SINNET and vetted at several forums during the 2004 calendar year, including a meeting of lighthouse sites in late March, the NGA Policy Academy on Cross-Systems Innovation in mid-April, and a meeting of the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance network (WELPAN) in May.

⁴This project was one of six selected as part of the NGA Policy Academy on Cross-Systems Innovation. Three members of SINNET (Susan Golonka, Jennifer Noyes, and Tom Corbett) completed a Utah site visit in December 2004. It was already apparent that the planning work for the original target population of interest was revealing other areas where collaboration across systems was likely to happen. For example, a web site was being developed through which all youth in need of help, not just youth aging out of foster care, might find out about available programs and services that cut across the TANF/