

"The effects of the ARC organizational intervention on caseworker turnover, climate, and culture in children services systems," by Charles Glisson, Denzel Dukes, Philip Green, Child Abuse and Neglect, August, 2006; " The effects of the ARC organizational intervention on caseworker turnover, climate, and culture in children's services systems, " by Michael Nunno, Child Abuse and Neglect, August, 2006.

These two articles are a rare attempt to bring a research orientation to questions concerning organizational influence on caseworker turnover, commitment, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and role conflict. Glisson, Duke and Green assert that their study is "the first to use a true experimental design to assess the impact of organizational intervention strategies on caseworker turnover, culture, and climate in a children's services system," a remarkable deficiency in child welfare research given the long standing concerns with the performance of public child welfare systems. This study builds on earlier work by Glisson and colleagues which found a relationship between positive organizational culture and climate and better outcomes for children served by child welfare systems (see Glisson and Hemmelgarn's 1998 article in Child Abuse and Neglect #22).

Michael Nunno comments that rates of child welfare staff turnover often approach 50% per year, a claim that sounds exaggerated but which actually occurred in the study described in these articles. "Life as a child welfare caseworker is given to role ambiguity, overload, exhaustion and conflict," according to Nunno, a description of child welfare work which may leave readers wondering how anyone survives in child welfare systems, a clue that something is missing in the description. Nevertheless, "In order to maintain a stable and skilled workforce, the question becomes how to create organizational cultures and climates that inoculate and buffer caseworker from these ambiguities, overloads and conflicts and allow them to improve the safety and permanency conditions of children and families who are in their care." (Nunno) In reality, Nunno states that "Since most child welfare services are provided within the context of large bureaucracies, the services provided have a likelihood of being defensive in nature ..." "Defensive organizational cultures are more likely to have norms that protect against public and political criticism and legal actions." Defensive cultures are less likely to embrace innovation, according to these authors. First and foremost, defensive cultures are risk averse; they seek to avoid or suppress bad news, require excessive documentation, depend on overly restrictive supervisory and management processes and demand rigid compliance with procedural specifications. This is not the way to create learning organizations which value experimentation and risk taking.

Glisson, Dukes and Green make a distinction between organizational culture and climate. Climate includes the "individual perception of the psychological impact of the work environment" and employees' collective perceptions of the organizational

environment. On the other hand, "Culture is defined only at the organizational level and captures the behavioral expectations and norms that characterize the way work is done in an organization or work unit." (Glisson, et al). Newly hired caseworkers are socialized to conform to an organization's behavioral expectations, for example to follow policies to the letter (or not), and to the values embodied in these expectations. Glisson, Dukes and Green regard culture as a "deeper" concept than climate because so much of an organizational culture is hidden, unconscious and implicit in the way the organization conducts business.

In this study of the Availability, Responsiveness and Continuity (ARC) organizational intervention with 235 caseworkers in 26 case management teams, the intervention had a large positive effect on caseworker turnover but little or no impact on organizational culture as measured by the Organizational Culture Survey (OCU) utilized in Glisson's earlier organizational research. Glisson, et al, comment that "The cultures of these types of large bureaucracies are deeply embedded and notoriously difficult to change." These authors believe that organizational cultures may take years to change. They do not consider the possibility that their ARC intervention probably left the main structural components of the organization's regulatory framework intact.

The ARC intervention emphasized vision, leadership, collaboration, the importance of personal relationships both within the public agency and between child welfare staff and stakeholders, teamwork, training, feedback on performance, participatory decision making, conflict resolution, continuous quality improvement and the redesign of work processes. These elements are likely to sound familiar to child welfare caseworkers, supervisors and managers around the country; and it is unclear how ARC differed from business as usual other than the unusual amount of attention the case management teams in the experimental group received.

The ARC intervention was implemented for one year by "change agents" through 2 hour weekly case management team meetings in 5 -6 week blocks. In addition, four 1-2 day workshops were held with regional directors and team leaders during the year. Further, quarterly meetings were held with regional directors to assess progress and challenges. ARC was clearly an ambitious intervention which made every effort to include line staff, supervisors and top managers. The cost of the intervention is not reported. ARC has a manual and a facilitator's guide.

The main beneficial result of ARC was that the employee turnover rate in the experimental condition was 39% in the year after baseline measures were collected compared to 65% in the control group. The researchers also found that "Caseworkers with more education reported higher levels of role conflict, role overload, and emotional exhaustion." "Minority caseworkers described lower levels of role conflict and depersonalization." The authors do not comment on these intriguing findings.

The main deficiency of the study is that it doesn't link the ARC intervention to child welfare outcomes. Glisson, Dukes and Green assume that there is a relationship between organizational culture and climate based on Glisson's earlier research in

Tennessee; but this is a finding which needs to be replicated many times before it is assumed to exist.

One of the more interesting comments in these articles is that "Studies also indicate that organizational interventions must focus on small groups or teams within an organization to be effective." Units and their supervisors are the organizational entities which have the greatest impact on caseworker performance and caseworker attitude in child welfare agencies. Glisson's recognition of this reality gives his work a potential impact which much of the public policy literature on organizational change lacks.

Glisson, Dukes, Green and Nunno also emphasize the importance of leadership in organizational change efforts, a theme which suggests that the organizational cultures of large public bureaucracies are strongly resistant to innovation without strong encouragement from the top. "What are the leadership qualities of those executives who are successful in maintaining organizations which are mission - driven, results - oriented, improvement -directed, relationship and network - centered, and participation based?", Nunno asks. This is a good question which is a frequent topic of discussion in the public policy literature but which does not adequately address a related question, "Why do child welfare bureaucracies tend to produce the type of defensive cultures which it requires strong leaders to change?" I look forward to thoughtful responses to this question.