

Leadership and Client Outcomes in Child and Family Services: A Model for Supportive Leadership

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation study focused on how leadership provided within Family Preservation services influenced client outcomes. A narrow focus on evidence-based client interventions has failed to adequately account for the benefits that individuals receiving services experience. The lack of any theoretical work that could explain the relationship between work unit leadership and client outcomes from a human services perspective led to a focus on developing a theoretical model utilizing Grounded Theory methodology.

An analysis of the experiences of workers, their leaders and the clients they served resulted in a Grounded Theory of Supportive Leadership in Child and Family Services. According to the proposed theory, improving client outcomes requires; (1) the availability of Supportive Leadership grounded in valuing trust-based relationships, a focus on clients' best interests, and supporting worker autonomy; (2) other sources of support through teammates and the organization as a whole that complement a leader's support; (3) a focus on building trust and relationship with clients that then facilitates the more technical aspect of doing of the work; (3) an acknowledgement of the critical role that relationships, common values and experiences of support play across all levels of organization; and (4) an understanding of how the environmental context within which services are delivered can influence efforts to achieve outcomes. This research suggests that trying to improve client outcomes by focusing solely on the more technical aspects of interventions is likely to fall short in the absence of Supportive Leadership regardless of the evidence base to support an intervention's effectiveness.

This dissertation offers a framework for providing Supportive Leadership within a human services context. The framework is consistent with current research on family-centered practice, clinical supervision, and organizational development and points towards possibilities for greater integration between these three lines of inquiry. While it diverges from current theoretical models in organizational and leadership literature, it could support the refinement of existing models as well as provide opportunities for applying the emerging Science of Complexity to the study of human services organizations.