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University Agency Collaboration to Design, Implement, and Evaluate a Leadership Development System

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University-Community Partnerships in Macro Practice

University-community partnerships integrating scholarship and service in social work date back to at least the days of Hull House (Harkavy and Puckett, 1994). Such collaborations have received increasing attention in recent years. A special issue of the Journal of Community Practice was devoted to such partnerships in macro practice (Soska & Butterfield, 2004). The case examples in that issue focused on collaborations with communities and community-based organizations, in contrast to the collaboration described here, which is between two universities and nine county human service agencies.

A related arena of collaboration, program evaluation using university researchers, has also become common (Briar-Lawson and Zlotnik, 2002). This focus on university-agency collaboration, as opposed to university-community collaboration, is represented in the case described here. Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Moroney (cited in Berg-Weger, Tebb, Cook, Gallagher, Florey, & Cruce, 2004, 146) define university-agency collaboration as "a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals." The goals of the collaboration described below are to explore and exchange ideas and information on strategic issues facing public human services and to develop strategies for addressing these issues.

The Collaboration

The Southern Area Consortium of Human Services (SACHS) serves as "a forum for county directors to explore and exchange ideas and information on issues facing public human services to develop strategies for addressing these issues" (Coloma, 2005). This collaboration had two points of origin. First, the Academy for Professional Excellence, a program of the School of Social Work at San Diego State University (Network for Excellence in Human Services), was developed by the Southern Region Public Child Welfare Training Academy, which included five of the SACHS counties and had provided training for county staff for nine years through Social Security Act Title IV-E funding. Second, the directors of the involved counties had been meeting informally to discuss county issues, exchange ideas, and offer colleague support. One serendipitous development occurred when a director who had been a member of an older collaboration, the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (Austin, Carnochan, Goldberg, Martin, Weiss, & Kelley, 1999), was hired as director of one of the southern area counties. The directors decided to make their collaboration formal, forming SACHS. The faculty consultant of the Bay Area consortium served as a consultant to SACHS during its formation.

SACHS directors and the directors of the two schools of social work, with staff support from the

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Academy for Professional Excellence, meet every quarter to informally discuss topics of interest, dialogue with invited experts in current strategic issue areas, and identify needs for research. During the first two years of its existence, SACHS conducted major research projects on two important issues: structural integration of services and interdepartmental collaboration (Patti, Packard, Daly, Tucker-Tatlow, & Farrell, 2003) and cutback management (Patti, Packard, Daly, Tucker-Tatlow, & Prosek, 2003).

The structural integration research included secondary analysis of the structures of all county agencies in the state and intensive on-site case studies of four counties which had successfully integrated their departments and three counties which had developed effective collaborations without structural change. Notable themes in these cases included the importance of executive leaders as "prime movers" who articulated a compelling vision for change, committed executive teams, and involvement of stakeholders including staff and community members. The second study involved interviews and focus groups in all nine SACHS agencies to identify best practices in managing budget cutbacks while maintaining quality services and staff capacity. Over 200 strategies for managing cutbacks were identified by agency respondents. For example, one county convened a series of meetings with program staff, financial management staff, and community stakeholders to prioritize programs and recommend reductions which had the least impact. Smaller scale research projects have addressed innovations in performance-based contracting, in-home supportive services, and child well-being indicators.

In the past year, the directors had extended dialogue on another key issue affecting all of their agencies: succession planning. Each agency was facing the retirements of many of their executive level staff, and the directors did not see in their own agencies the executive talent in their management ranks which could provide competent replacements for retiring executives. Rather than relying on external executive development programs, the directors told SACHS staff to prepare a custom-designed executive development process which would provide managers who could successfully be promoted into executive positions.

Leadership Development for Succession Planning

Program Design

In human service organizations, the importance of leadership is clear (Elpers & Westhuis, 2005; Mary, 2005), and the need for highly skilled leaders is acute (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). After a review of existing executive development programs (e.g., Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Schwartz, Axtman, & Freeman, 1998), the directors of the SACHS counties decided to support the development of a program uniquely designed for their particular needs. Consortium staff and a faculty consultant, with input from other experts, designed the program, implemented in 2005 with 24 participants. This paper will review the design process used, the key aspects of the program, how it is being evaluated, and evaluation results. While it builds upon best practices in leadership development, and in particular a similar program with nine years of experience (Austin, Weisner, Schrandt, Glezos-Bell, Murtaza, in press), several aspects of this venture represent notable innovations.

The program design began with the directors brainstorming important leadership skills, prioritizing management competencies relevant to human service organizations based on a literature review (e.g., Menefee, 2000; Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Wimpfheimer, 2004), and discussion of program design considerations. Staff conducted four focus groups with 45 managers of the involved agencies, with participants describing gaps in existing executive development programs, essential leadership skills, desired program outcomes, and preferred learning methods. Thirty-three competencies resulted from this assessment process and the literature review. Core elements identified for the

initiative included workshops featuring both professional trainers and local experts (e.g., department directors), varied learning methods with an emphasis on participant interaction, 360-degree feedback (London, 2002), individual learning plans, and group action learning projects (explained below).

Site visits were held with executive teams in the counties to generate interest in and commitment to the program, discuss expectations and the need for agency support of participants, and set the stage for selection of participants. It was important at this point that the directors clearly and strongly showed their interest in and support for the project, since it was understood that the time demands placed on the participants and their supervisors would compete with the demands of other ongoing agency projects and activities. One strategy for "selling" agency executives on this was to present the program as an investment in human resources which would pay off later through an expanded pool of executive talent.

The curriculum was developed by staff, assisted by consultants with human services and executive development expertise. Early on, valuable consultation was provided by staff of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (Austin, Weisner, Schrandt, Glezos-Bell, Murtaza, in press), which had conducted their own executive development program for nine years. Many of their program elements were adapted here. The final program included three-day blocks of training, delivered over a period of four months. Topics included vision and purpose, judgment and values, personal style, influence, decision making, coaching, managing accountability and results, strategic management, financial management, political savvy, and organizational change.

Participants

Each participating agency director nominated staff whom they and their executives saw as having executive potential and being able to benefit from additional development. (One county did not participate because it had its own county-wide executive development program.) From a group of 33 nominees, 24 participants from eight agencies were selected. Selection factors included allocations based on agency size and diversity in demographics and program areas of participants. Fifty-four percent of participants were female, 46 percent were male. Twenty-one percent were African American, four percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, 29 percent were Latino, and 46 percent were White/Caucasian. All but one participant had a bachelor's degree, and 58 percent had a master's degree. The group chosen represented a variety of program areas, including Child Welfare, Welfare to Work, Aging & Adult Services, Indigent Services, Community Relations, and Administration. Eighteen participants (75 percent) were mid-level managers, five participants (21 percent) were upper level managers, and one participant (4 percent) was a support staff. On average participants had 11 years of management experience, with 19 percent having 5 years or less, 57 percent having 6–10 years, 10 percent having 10–20 years , and 14 percent having more than 20 years management experience. Fifty-four percent of participants were responsible for up to 50 employees, 21 percent were responsible for 51–100 employees, 13 percent were responsible for 101–250 employees, 8 percent were responsible for 251–500, and 4 percent were responsible for 501–1,000 employees.

Program Implementation

Prior to the sessions, each of the participants and their supervisor, peers, and subordinates completed a 360-degree feedback instrument (London, 2002). Staff had selected a 360-degree feedback tool which closely matched the program's identified competencies (Consulting Tools, 2004). In addition to being a good match with competencies identified for this initiative, the tool had the advantages of convenient on-line administration and detailed report generation. Collated results were shared by consultants with participants in individual feedback sessions. After these sessions, participants completed individual development plans in consultation with their supervisors.

A particularly impactful aspect of collaboration was the use of current and former agency directors and other executives as trainers. These executives

volunteered to lead segments of the workshops based on their particular interests. They were encouraged to share their practice wisdom, illustrated with case examples, in the context of the learning objectives of the modules. As will be seen in the discussion below regarding evaluation, the presentations by the directors and other executives were the most highly rated component of the program.

The first three-day training block opened with an introduction and orientation meeting and dinner the night before the sessions. Three agency directors offered energetic welcomes to participants, outlining the origins and visions for the project. Participants also reviewed their 360-degree feedback results and individual development plans to set the stage for how the sessions would address these. Participants were paired into learning dyads (Jones & Jones, 1973), and time was scheduled for them to meet briefly during most daily sessions to discuss integration and application of learnings and to support and challenge each other regarding their own development.

Another unique aspect of this model was the use of action learning projects. The agency directors developed a list of key current policy and program issues for which they needed analysis and action proposals, and participants formed groups to address them. Issues included child welfare systems improvement, independent living programs, Medicaid redesign, homeless programs and TANF sanctions. These reports were presented at the final session to the directors and the participants' supervisors. Later, several participants reported the application of aspects of their reports in their agencies.

Extensive research was conducted early on to assess how the Leaders in Action program design and delivery could be tailored to the needs of the involved agencies. While all pieces of this system except, perhaps, the action learning projects, existed somewhere prior to inclusion here, these elements were customized to the collective needs of the counties served, as was the specific content of the program. This represents Senge's (1990) definition of innovation: "component technologies" coming together to form an "ensemble of technologies that are critical to each others' success" (p. 6). Innovations in this process included the combination of literature and client input to develop desired competencies to address local director and department needs, connecting session presentations by directors with research and theory, cross-function and cross-department groups at sessions, daily dyads and oral debriefings, and the use of action learning projects. Buy-in and support for the program from agency leadership (the county social service directors and other executives) allowed successful integration of the program with existing training structures within the counties.

Evaluation Findings

This initiative will eventually be evaluated on four levels (Kirkpatrick, 1996): trainee reactions, knowledge and skills gain, graduates' behavior changes in the work setting, and performance in program or work areas under the responsibility of graduates. Evaluation methods used during this first year were primarily formative: activities undertaken to furnish information to guide program improvement. The evaluation methods included:

- **Demographic Survey**—Demographic information on all 24 participants was obtained via a brief two-page demographic survey.
- **Classroom Performance System (CPS) Data Collection**—CPS (Pearson Education, Inc., 2004.) is an electronic system for collecting and processing evaluation feedback. Evaluation questions appeared on a large screen at the front of the room, and participants anonymously entered their answers to each evaluation question using a remote-control device. Results were automatically collated and processed electronically. CPS evaluations were conducted at the end of each training day, and an additional overall evaluation was conducted at the end of the series.
- **Oral Feedback**—Oral feedback was solicited in a large group fashion periodically throughout the training to obtain information to make program adjustments during and after the training.

- **Focus Groups**—Focus groups were held separately with participants and their supervisors two months after the completion of the program to gain additional information and insight to refine programming for future cycles. These groups were also used to solicit examples of applications of new skills, the results of the action learning projects, and performance improvements in the participants' programs.
- **Written Surveys**—A written survey was used at the end of the training program to obtain qualitative feedback via open-ended questions. Another written survey was administered during focus groups that occurred after the completion of LIA in order to obtain feedback on how to improve various key components of LIA (360 Assessments, Individual Development Plans, Action Learning Projects, dyads, orientation, and the kick-off event).

The CPS participant satisfaction surveys generally showed high satisfaction with program components (e.g., the 360 assessment, action learning projects; see Figure 1) and individual modules and trainers (see Figure 2). When asked "Was the training a good use of your time?" 82 percent said the training was "very useful" (the highest rating) and the remaining 18 percent said "useful"; 100 percent said the trainers were either "excellent" (61 percent) or "good" (39 percent); and 100 percent said the curriculum was either "excellent" (48 percent) or "good" (52 percent). According to the written surveys, "hearing from directors," who comprised a large number of the trainers, was seen as the most helpful aspect of the program. Written comments elaborated on some of the quantitative results. Many comments focused not on the modules themselves but on how they could be better set up and utilized, such as providing clearer and more detailed instructions for the learning dyads, individual development plans, and action learning projects. In focus groups held shortly after the completion of training, participants also offered feedback on how their supervisors and upper managers could better support their participation in the program (see Table 1). For example, executives were encouraged to become more familiar with the program content and to create opportunities for application of new knowledge and skills at work. Feedback on items with relatively low scores and related comments were used to make adjustments in planning for the next program cycle.

Overall themes from feedback on the program components are noted in Table 2.

Regarding changes in participants at work, both participants and their supervisors identified in focus groups the ways in which the program had impacted their performance in the work setting. Participants noted the following changes in themselves:

- More careful about political implications of actions/decisions
- More confidence in handling conflict on the job, particularly in community outreach
- More inclusive of subordinates in decision-making
- Increased self-awareness
- Used new knowledge to educate & promote growth in our staff
- Applied accountability and strategic management principles in work with committees
- Applied skills learned during interview for promotion

(Since the program was completed, five of the participants have been promoted. No data are available to suggest that the program had a direct impact upon promotions.)

Supervisors offered these examples of changes they observed in their subordinates:

- Broader perspective/wider understanding of issues
- More confidence
- Demonstrated increase in knowledge about various aspects of leadership
- Increased presence in leadership role
- Increased self-awareness
- Increased ability to "think outside the box"

A more comprehensive evaluation is being planned for year two. There will be less emphasis

Figure 1: Usefulness of program components

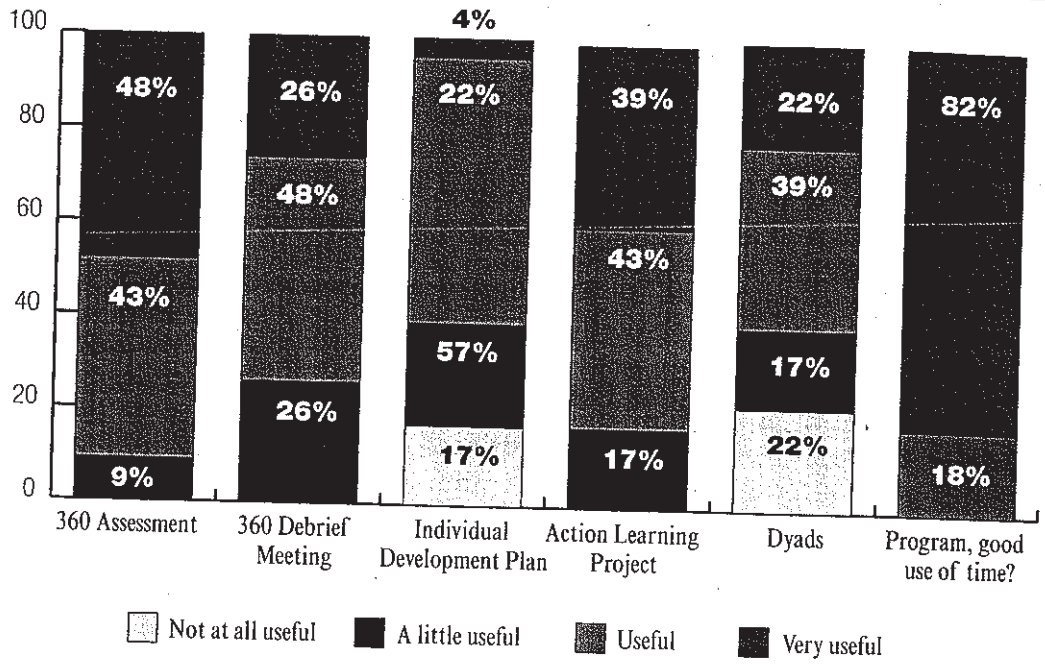

Figure 2: Participant Assessment of Training Module Components

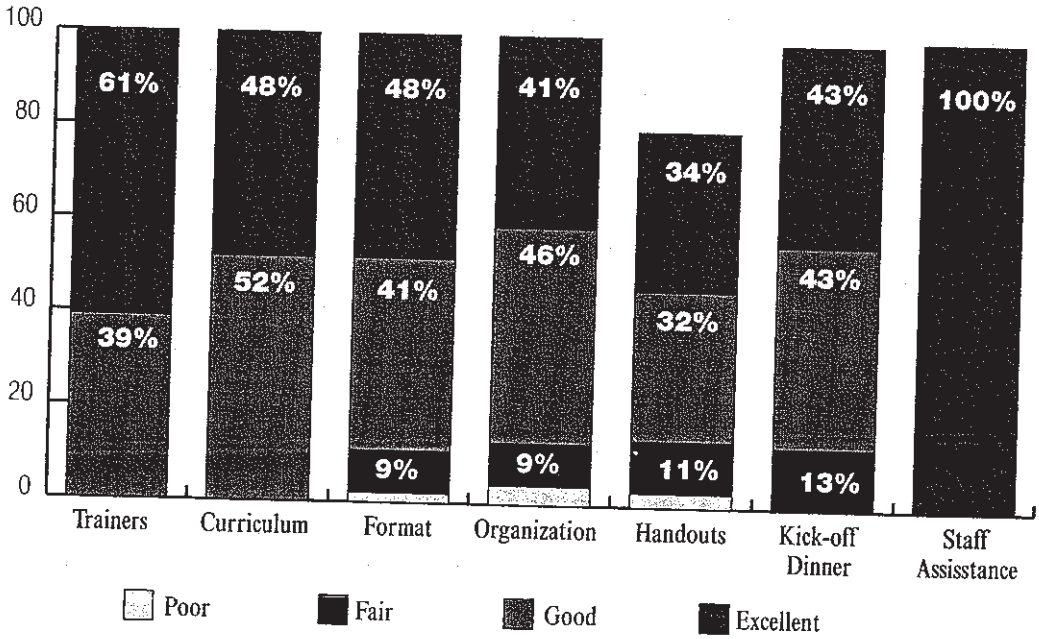

Table 1: Participant Suggestions for Management Support of Program Participation

Ways Supervisors Could Support Participants

- Identify opportunities to apply new learning. For example, expose participants to high profile committees and opportunities to interact with other agencies.
- Make an effort to become better oriented to the program. Discover what learning took place, etc.
- Give more attention to Individual Development Plans (IDP's).
- Encourage promotion and development of career tracks in the agency, county, and state for participants.
- Encourage presentation of program learning to others on staff.
- "It's the participant's responsibility to dialogue with their supervisor."

Ways Upper Management Could Support Participants

- Avoid sending managers if they are not serious about developing the individual for further advancement in the agency's career ladder.
- Make an effort to become better oriented to the program. Discover what the program is about: curriculum, etc.
- Actively demonstrate buy-in and support for the program.
- For those participants who have supervisor changes during their participation, find out if the participant is receiving adequate mentoring/coaching and support for their attendance.

Table 2: Summary of Feedback on Program Components

ORIENTATION

- Face-to-face orientation meeting involving both participants and supervisors needed
- Find ways to identify supervisor changes in order to orient new supervisors after the start of the program

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT/SELECTION

- Aim for better homogeneity in terms of participant level in the county hierarchy (some were from the lower management ranks)

FORMAT/DELIVERY

- Develop a 'learning culture' that supports adult learning theories and critical thinking
- Consider partnering directors with trainers more frequently
- Provide directors with small group exercises and scenarios to support application of new skills in the classroom
- Utilize classroom journaling, daily personal inventory checklist
- Provide professional articles and other readings
- Recommend homework to support transfer of learning back at the office

CURRICULUM

- Hire consultant to assist in restructuring curriculum topics
- Include a mock presentation to county elected officials, including preparation of staff reports
- Provide follow up additional training on strategic planning; allow for a full day session in the upcoming year

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

- Provide more structure, guidance, and attention to IDP's during training
- Increased supervisor involvement needed with IDP's. Provide more explanation as to the purpose and importance at orientation, and take measures to promote buy-in and support for IDP's and mentoring.
- Short-term goals might make IDP's more meaningful and relevant to the training, ensuring greater success with transfer of learning

LEARNING DYADS

- Revise orientation to dyads and partner selection process
- Provide more structure for dyad interactions

ACTION LEARNING PROJECTS

- Provide more structure for final report format (i.e. require recommendations/action plan)
- Require participants to partner on a project (increase learning, reduce workload)

on formative issues, since feedback for the first cycle provided thorough input on improvements which could be made to the program. More attention will be paid to actual changes in the workplace, if possible looking at performance of programs or projects for which graduates are responsible.

One final indicator of success from the point of view of the directors and executive staff is that they nominated forty three managers for participation in the second program cycle in the coming year. Based on the directors' satisfaction and continuing interest in the program, thirty one participants (seven more than in the first cycle) have been selected for the second cycle.

Regarding SACHS as a whole, there are some indirect measures of the directors' satisfaction with the collaboration. At a basic level, directors have shown their interest in SACHS through their attendance at quarterly meetings, involving at least some travel for all but one or two members for each meeting. Notably, a former SACHS director was appointed as the State Director of Social Services, and kept attending meetings as possible, sending a representative from his staff in the state capitol to each meeting. At their annual planning session, members identified several issues for attention over the next year, including racial/ethnic disproportionality of children in the child welfare system, performance management, automation and geographic information systems, and in-home supportive services funding issues. University collaborators will be conducting a major research project on disproportionality for the agency directors.

Lessons Learned and Success Factors

Berg-Werger et al (2004, 146-147) summarized success factors for agency-university research partnerships. Several of these have particular relevance for the leadership initiative just described and also were relevant in earlier SACHS research projects for their agencies. Specifically:

- mutual respect, trust, and understanding are required;
- the collaborative must serve the self-interests of all participants;
- regular communication regarding objectives is required;
- the partners must be familiar with each other's settings and needs;
- roles and plans must be clear; and
- adequate resources are provided.

Because of the early history of SACHS, a great deal of mutual respect existed between agency and university participants. The involved university staff had notable practice credibility: the director of the Academy for Professional Excellence is a retired county director; the original faculty research coordinator is a nationally-known expert in social work administration; the leadership program coordinator is a retired county executive, and the faculty consultant is a former human services manager with years of government-sector consulting experience. Another success factor related to staffing involves management competence. The Academy has been able to hire highly skilled and experienced staff who are comfortable working with county staff and able to deliver quality products within designated timelines and budgets. Every quarterly meeting of the SACHS directors includes time for feedback to staff, and the SACHS chair and Academy director regularly communicate to ensure that projects are moving as planned and that necessary adjustments are made.

University participants ensured that their work was in service of the agencies rather than focusing on their own research and publishing agendas. The interests of the agencies were addressed through the findings of research projects which they could apply (e.g., successful cutback management techniques) and staff who enhanced their skills as leaders. The collaboration benefits the university through opportunities to test theories and principles in work settings and to acquire knowledge regarding the current demands and needs of human service administrators which can be used to modify curricula. The university also benefits through an enhanced reputation which has led to additional training and consulting projects with the involved counties. In a related area, the university is investigating the need

for a certificate program in social work administration for direct practice MSWs interested in administration. This would likely include continuing education credits through the Office of Professional Development, a social work continuing education program operated by the Academy. Finally, the projects have offered useful opportunities for MSW students, as graduate assistants, to learn how to apply classroom content in a work setting.

Regarding the leadership development initiative, one especially important and successful aspect of this collaboration was the hands-on involvement of the directors throughout the project. They were essential to the development of desired competencies and selection of program content, provided leadership in their agencies to support the project, served as trainers, designated action learning projects to help in their agencies' current operations, and celebrated participants and their supervisors at a graduation ceremony.

Without the extensive collaboration between agency executives and university staff that was embedded in this venture, it seems unlikely that a project such as this would have succeeded as it did. University faculty and staff could have designed an executive development program, but if the agencies did not have confidence in the content of the program and the capabilities of the staff, they may have chosen to send their staff to other free-standing leadership development programs. In such a case, the value added by director involvement in design and training of the program would have been lost, probably lessening the value of the skills and insights that participants would bring back to apply in a work setting. In contrast, this collaboration between agency directors and their staff and university staff and faculty has enhanced organizational performance and the universities' abilities to offer support to agency policy and practice.

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