Lessons Learned

Adaptive Leadership:
Essential Wisdom for Active Practice

Adaptive leadership creates safe space to give the work back to the people where the problems are happening, encourages innovation, and nurtures shared ownership for moving forward.

Supporting the use of new programs, practices, and policies often bumps up against "the way we always do things." We use a lot of technical strategies – e.g., regular meetings as a straightforward method of regular communication – when managing people, projects, and services. But when the same conversations keep happening with little action and ongoing frustration, there is likely more going on than regular meetings can solve. We cannot manage our way through adaptive, complex challenges that impact people in different ways, have competing perspectives, and have no clear solutions. Adaptive leadership creates safe space to give the work back to the people where the problems are happening, encourages innovation, and nurtures shared ownership for moving forward.

What This Can Look Like in Practice:

Residential redesign efforts at the heart of the BBI/Six Core pilot project provide an illustration of what adaptive change looks like in action. PRTFs' transformation away from coercive milieu treatment approaches to trauma-focused strategies that foster family and youth voice required adaptive leadership at multiple levels of the child behavioral health system to tackle this complex adaptive challenge.

Leadership and implementation teams were invited to "get on the balcony"[1] and engage in strategic thinking and reflective practices to explore key questions, informed by implementation science, to build collaborative visions for success, highlight strengths and gaps, and identify capacities needed to build an effective support system for implementing BBI and Six Core Strategies. Leading adaptive change also looked like collective learning and perspective taking to support the team's readiness to do this new way of work well. For example, one site faced initial challenges during efforts to implement rigorous debriefing

Voices From the Field

"The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems."

-Ronald Heifetz

For More Information

➢ Learn Implementation: Leadership & Implementation Teams

➢ Acumen Academy: Adaptive Leadership Course

➢ Handout: Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges

➢ Podcast: Implementation Science at Work Episode 3

FRANK PORTER GRAHAM
CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

THE IMPACT CENTER at FPG
Building Capacity for Stronger Systems and Communities

techniques immediately following a seclusion/restraint incident. With the principles of adaptive change guiding the way, the team found that both staff and youth involved in the incident would benefit from having time to process and self-regulate before engaging in the debriefing process. Rather than continuing to apply a technical solution of immediate debriefing, the site was able to find opportunities for adaptive change that modeled the trauma-informed culture the agency was striving to gain.

1. Heifetz, R. A., & Laurie, D. L. (1997). The work of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 75(1), 124-134.

Connect With Us

The Impact Center's Build Up project at Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute believes improving outcomes requires a deliberate focus on *how* we support change. Our team works with State agencies, LME/MCOs, and other community and system partners within children's behavioral health to facilitate use of effective implementation practices in support of improving children, youth, and family outcomes. To learn more, contact us at build_up@unc.edu