

A Model for Child and Youth Care Leaders for Excellent Decision Making

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At the core of Child and Youth Care practice is a strong emphasis on the importance of collaboration in relationships and in decision making. Krueger (1996) points out that organizational leaders set the tone in the agency and should be modeling collaborative work among themselves. When making decisions leaders must think of both short term and long term implications of their choices. Any crucial decision should look at the impact of time and that might include longer

term ethical implications. Inclusive decision making is a strong asset in making ethically sound decisions (Doyle and Smith, (2003).

Ideally a CYC Leader would have enough time and resources when making a significant decision to gather multiple viewpoints and have a process that achieves consensus among all impacted by the decision. However, we also know the reality of organizational dynamics, and the world we live in, seldom allow for that to happen as much as we would like. We are also in a period of rapidly changing times in our field that can impact the ability of a leader to make decisions at an optimum collaborative level. The increased pressures of compliance, budget cuts, staffing struggles, and increased demands on a leader's own time can steer the leader, if not careful, to making decisions with the eyes of a "manager" and not a "leader". Ultimately, as those pressures increase, and inherent in the role of a leader, the responsibility to make crucial decisions will center on the leader's ability to make decisions more strongly on their own judgment. Reinsilber (2006) points out that one of main reasons a person is promoted to be a supervisor is to ultimately make the tough decisions. Jill Shah and I have developed a working model for a leader to make decisions in a thoughtful way to maximize assessing the impact of the decision on others in a short term and long term framework, as well as assessing how the decision will impact their credibility as a leader. The leader should place strong emphasis on how the decision may effect relationships they have with others and have that focus throughout

the process. When making decisions our suggestion for a working model is:

- **What are the issues to be decided?** What is the best way to frame what exactly is being decided? How do the issues inter-relate with one another? Is there a way to frame the issue in a quantitative manner?
- **How will the decision be made?** It is crucial for leaders to be clear and very transparent about how the decision will be made. Will you have a vote in a team meeting? Will you take some input and then decide yourself? Will you try to get consensus from all before moving forward? It is very important for a leader's credibility not to try to "fake" wanting more input that they really do.
- **Who is important to consult with?** Have peers in my position made similar decisions? Who else will this decision impact both inside and outside the program? Should they be consulted before making the decision? How much approval range do you need above you in the hierarchy of the agency to finalize the decision? Have others in the agency, or peers in the community, made similar decisions and



what can you learn from consulting with them about their experiences?

- **What are the options available for a decision?** How much will you narrow the realistic choices down before deciding? Will the decision be for a shorter term and then open to formal review before finalizing?
 - **What are predicted concrete short term plus and minus consequences?**
What are predicted concrete long term plus and minus consequences?
"Managers" are usually very good at making decisions with the information in front of them geared to short term effectiveness. Excellent leaders need to be able to think "three steps ahead" and assess how the decision will impact people and systems over time.
- **Am I willing to accept short term loss for potential long term gain?** Am I taking a foolish short term gain for a long term loss? Excellent leaders should be able to assess and accept the importance of being comfortable with short term losses for potential strong long term gains. This focus would be

exceptionally important when making decisions that are tied to a strong value base you have or building a program culture you believe strongly in. It is also important to assess how the decision will impact relationships in both the short and long term. You should be particularly careful not to take a tempting short term gain for a long term loss of credibility, integrity, or relationship.

- **What are potential unintended consequences?** When making a decision a leader should try to use as much of a critical thinking process as possible. Most leaders have a “dominant thought process” that will drive their decision making. Particularly when you feel very strongly that a decision you are making is the “correct one”, you should take time to argue against your strongest beliefs in formulating the decision. This may be a way to assess what consequences may be created outside your targeted impact areas of the decision. Who can you trust to be fully honest with you to present strong arguments against your strong beliefs about a decision?

- **Is the decision ethically and mission related sound?** Were there any “Divided Loyalty” decisions involved and if so, how to address it? Is your decision sound within the core values of the agency and the field? Are there ethical issues to consider with your decision? If you conclude there are no short term ones are their possible long term ethical concerns? The more collaborative the decision is, the more protection you will have against unsound ethical implications. It is also important to consider that most ethical decisions are not merely a choice between “right and wrong”, but often a decision between more than one “right” and involve situations that may create divided loyalties to children/families, the agency, workers, etc. Have everyone’s rights been protected?
- **Will the desired outcomes produce a standard of excellence level of service?** It is important to define and communicate what an “excellent outcome” would entail. How will you evaluate and monitor that?



CHILD AND YOUTH CARE IN PRACTICE (2012), edited by Thom Garfat & Leon Fulcher, offers some of the best of contemporary writings on Child & Youth Care practice. Starting with an up dated version of the characteristics of a CYC approach this book demonstrates the application of a Child & Youth Care approach across many areas of our work. This is a practice ideas book, ideal for college courses, teams, trainers, carers, managers and individual practitioners.

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- **What are the political consequences short term? Long term?**
How can I monitor and adapt to them? Being able to have a thorough understanding and positively navigate organizational politics are crucial qualities for a leader to have maximum effectiveness and enhance quality service in a program. It is a crucial for a leader to avoid the thinking that “politics” are distasteful or negative. Strong attention should be given to assessing how the decision will impact others and how you will preserve and nurture relationships to get maximum short and long term support.
- **Who/what will we competing with this decision?** Who/what will be conflicting with? How will the decision meet structured or institutional resistance?
- **What don't I know?** When told he was the smartest man in all of Greece, Aristotle is rumored to have said “If that is so, it is only because of how much I am aware of what I do not know”. Think this through!
- **What is the worst that could happen?** Are there safety issues involved? How would the program or your credibility be damaged? What is your plan if the worst should happen? Is the potential gain worth the risk?
- **Will this decision, in any way, change “who we are”?** This is very crucial long term thinking. For instance, an agency that has a strong value and history of nurturing and welcoming clients puts a visible security presence at the front door after an incident. Does

that “message” change the tone of program values and culture?

- **What resources are necessary for implementation?** Are the resources enough to produce a standard of excellence outcome? Leaders should make a realistic assessment of whether there are necessary monetary, time and people resources to achieve a standard of excellence in the implementation.
- **Do we have the personnel already to implement this decision?** Who will champion the decision and be key in implementing it? Who will accept in unenthusiastically? Who will resist it? Who will undermine it? An assessment should be made of these factors to create a flexible and realistic strategy for implementing and monitoring progress of a decision.
- **How will the decision be announced?** Is there anyone I should alert before announcing it? How and when should the decision be announced? Should it be in a senior leadership meeting and then interpreted for other staff? Should an e-mail be sent? Should there be an all-staff meeting? How will the decision be received by children and families and when and how should they find out? Emphasis should be placed on a consistent, clear message that is carefully announced in regard to time.
- **Once announced how will progress of implementation be monitored and adapted to?** How will progress of implementation be monitored? Will there be reports at meetings? Will you



do more “management by walking around”? Excellent leaders have a process to monitor implementation and are willing to adapt the process as needed as time moves on?

- **How will the outcomes be evaluated? Who will evaluate it? When will it be evaluated?** What is the criteria to determine if we achieved “excellence” in the outcome? Leaders should be clear about outcome expectations connected to each decision and how and when that will be reviewed and evaluated. Strong emphasis should be placed on reviewing decisions that turn out very successfully as much as those that do not reach expectations. Excellent leaders learn from their mistakes, but should also keep a clear focus on learning from successes. Understanding and communicating that well can help in building a positive program culture.

At the 1st CYC World Conference in Newfoundland in 2013 I chaired a panel discussion that included Okpara Rice (USA), James Freeman (USA) and Kathleen Mulvey (Scotland) that was entitled “The Island Can Be Lonely: Leading and Learning”. At the 2014 Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care National Conference we added Kelly Shaw (Canada) to the panel and presented the same topic. What I believe came across loud and clear to both audiences was how seriously established CYC leaders, spanning a number of countries, take the responsibilities of the decisions they make that impact the lives

of so many practitioners and children and how important it is to be self-reflective and thoughtful in how they make those decisions. That sense of responsibility is admirable, but it can definitely make one feel a little lonely sometimes. Hopefully these guidelines will help provide a structure for more leaders to feel “the island is less lonely”.

References

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