

What you need to know about promoting systems integration to serve consumers with multiple needs.

Core Qualities of the Change Agent

- ◆ Learn how to identify and select effective change agents.
- ◆ Identify the skills needed to promote integration across service systems that reduce demands on more expensive and restrictive alternatives.

Defining the Change Agent Roles

The previous seven issues of *The Change Agent's TOOL BOX* have addressed the nature and process of integrating human service systems to better address the needs of persons with co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse problems. The issues encountered when identifying key stakeholders who can help make change happen, defining core system issues and problems, strategically planning interventions that close gaps and barriers, and mobilizing and evaluating concrete change efforts are complex and challenging.

This final issue of the *TOOL BOX* considers the necessary qualities of the systems change agent. What types of individuals can mobilize a system to change? What are the specific skills required to promote integration across multiple systems? Where in the system should the change agent be placed? The answers to these questions may help to ensure that integration efforts produce long-term solutions to significant system problems through a process that preserves dignity and respect for both consumers of services and the full range

of stakeholders across multiple systems. True change agents must be comfortable assuming different roles at different times. Sometimes the change agent needs to address the seemingly endless obstacles to change that are contained within various statutory, regulatory and even clinical environments.

To understand and integrate the policies and procedures that govern the many systems involved in systems-integration efforts, the change agent needs to be a highly effective bureaucrat. Yet the change agent must also be able to articulate and promote a vision of a different way of doing business and have the energy and drive to rally diverse stakeholders in support of specific strategies and tactics.

This means that the change agent must also be an effective advocate. Paul Carling, Ph.D., of the Center for Community Change at Trinity College of Vermont suggests that these two different skill sets can be united in the persona of the "advocrat"—part bureaucrat, part advocate. The concept of the advocrat effectively captures much of the work and spirit of the successful change agent.

The change agent must understand and function in cooperation with many different systems. In order to effectively promote improved services for persons with co-occurring disorders, the change agent must be knowledgeable and effective in the arenas of mental illness, substance abuse, criminal justice, housing, entitlements and other social and human service issues. Henry Steadman, Ph.D., of Policy Research Associates, Inc., has defined the ability to function competently in a role that crosses multiple systems as "boundary spanning." The boundary spanner understands the specific interests and needs of the varied systems involved in the change process and promotes a dialogue that transcends the familiar limitations of categorical thinking and rigid silos that restrict the activities of traditional managers.

Central to this boundary-spanning role is the ability to earn the trust of numerous stakeholders who must collaborate to promote effective change. This trust may be tenuous at times—a change agent who wins the enthusiastic support of one system may find that other systems have automatically become suspicious of his or her activities. The boundary spanner spends much time walking the fine lines between systems, being careful not to stray so far into one viewpoint or ideology that his or her efforts are rejected by others. The ability to live comfortably within this delicate balance is essential.



Placing the Change Agent Within the System

One of the critical tasks in mobilizing a successful systems-integration initiative involves identifying where to locate the change agent to maximize his or her effectiveness. This placement decision must be based, at least in part, on what the change agent is expected to accomplish and what level(s) of the system have been targeted for change.

Change agents placed at the service-delivery level can help to promote integration of client care on a case-by-case basis. For example, the “back door” staff responsible for transitioning and linking individuals with co-occurring disorders from integrated crisis stabilization services to ongoing treatment in the community naturally function as boundary spanners among direct service providers. Promoting integrated treatment plans by sponsoring cross-system case staffing and cross-training are appropriate activities for the change agent at the direct-services level. Forging cross-system linkages that facilitate the successful transfer of clients to integrated services in specific agency settings can also be a service-level change agent role.

Alternatively, change agents placed at the “macro” systems level can help to promote policy and programmatic integration that affect larger human service structures. The macro-level change agent works to develop and implement strategic planning, pilot projects and ongoing programming across the multiple service systems that touch clients with co-occurring substance abuse and mental health issues. The change agent may also participate in examining how and where the range of resources available to all involved care systems are allocated and distributed. Development and marketing of

proposals to share or blend resources (both in-kind services and actual dollars) are within the domain of the systems-level change agent.

Institutionalizing the Change Agent Role

Precisely because the change agent will from time to time be a less-than-popular figure on the systems-integration landscape, the change agent role is most effective when it is institutionalized and insulated to some extent from day-to-day political tensions. Change agents will have a greater chance to succeed if they are permanent employees who have the ability to withstand

unfavorable initial reactions to integration proposals.

Similarly, it is important to ensure that change agents do not become isolated from or marginalized by the systems that they seek to integrate. Direct supervision of the change agent should be ongoing and supportive. Opportunities to spend time with other change agents who may be operating at different levels of the system should also be maximized.

No matter where in the various systems the change agent functions, care should be taken to ensure that the change agent has sufficient clout to be effective. By traditional standards, change agents have limited authority. They rarely supervise large programs or multiple staff. However, change agents can hold positions that give them significant power even without the familiar badge of line-staff authority.

Service-level change agents must have mechanisms by which they can hold direct service providers accountable for their work. Often attaching the service-level change agent to a primary system's funding stream is sufficient authority needed to make change occur.

At the macro-systems level, the change agent's position should be senior enough to directly relate to other system managers and directors. Placing the change agent on the same level as other senior managers in the agency gives this individual the voice and position he or she needs to be heard.

When change agents have earned the trust of their supervisors, the ongoing work and recommendations change agent's produce need to be supported by senior system authorities. Without

NTAC Director's Message

What makes a successful change agent? This issue of the *Change Agent's TOOL BOX* addresses the characteristics and skills that enable a Change Agent to successfully mobilize systems change and integration. It recommends criteria for selecting individuals for this position and assessing their effectiveness.

Because this is the final installment of the *TOOL BOX*, we would like to offer a special note of thanks to author and change agent David M. Wertheimer, M.S.W., M. Div., for sharing his expertise, insight and enthusiasm for promoting systems integration. He reminds us that the ultimate goal of this process must be improved outcomes for recipients of mental health and substance abuse services.

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this support, it will be difficult to ensure the prioritization of change activities by program-specific managers and supervisors who are reluctant to embrace the difficult work of integration. Resistance to systems change is actually one good indicator that the integration agenda is gaining momentum. Discomfort should be anticipated as part of the process.

Making room for differing opinions is part of the work of building a broad-based systems change consensus, but addressing dissension does not mean allowing criticism to derail the change process. Strong backup for the change agent at the highest levels of a system is essential to promoting systems change over time.

Finding Candidates for Change Agent Position

The criteria to be used for the selection of change agents will vary depending on the location in the system at which the change agents will be placed and the nature of the work they will be asked to

- ◆ exposure to cross-training opportunities at which integrated approaches to client care have been prioritized;
- ◆ strong communication skills, including writing and public speaking abilities;
- ◆ strong facilitation skills, including the ability to build consensus among groups of diverse stakeholders; and
- ◆ a good political “nose” with the ability to sense and manage controversy.

A candidate who is known to the system and has been employed in other capacities may bring a proven track record and an established level of trust in the community. This may be both a strength and a liability, depending on whether their allegiances to any particular system are too strong to promote credibility among other stakeholders.

specialized training. Hiring the right person for the job is a delicate and subjective task.

How To Know When It Is Working

Whether they operate at the direct-services or systems level, change agents must have the time and tools that they need to accomplish the mission. The change agent's supervisor should assist the individual in developing a realistic work plan and implementation timeline.

Specific outcome measures can help to identify when the change agent's efforts are becoming successful. As is the case in evaluating the success of system integration itself (see issue no. 7 on outcome measurement), indicators of success for change agents should be related both to process and outcome measures that are objective and subjective in nature.

For services-level change agents, expected outcomes may include:

- ◆ integrated approaches to case planning as they emerge from case-specific staffing of challenging clients;
- ◆ increased cross-training so that staff become knowledgeable about and competent in multiple system environments;
- ◆ development of working agreements at provider agency levels that promote integrated approaches to care for clients with co-occurring disorders; and
- ◆ improved treatment outcomes for multiple-problem clients, including successful linkages to needed services and reductions in use of more expensive and

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accomplish. However, the following characteristics of the change agent may be useful regardless of where in a given system the agent is functioning:

- ◆ experience in providing direct services to clients in the public sector, particularly to clients with multiple problems;
- ◆ experience in supervising staff or managing programs that work with multiple problem clients;

A candidate who is new to the systems in which integration will occur may bring a perspective to the process that others view as unbiased and open-minded. The outside candidate, however, may also be at a disadvantage in not knowing the unique features of a given environment.

In the final analysis, the personality and interpersonal skills that change agents bring to their work may be far more important qualifications than any advanced degree or

restrictive forms of care (e.g., inpatient care, involuntary treatment, jail).

Expectations and outcomes for systems-level change agents should include:

- ◆ formation and successful operation of stakeholder coalitions and advisory groups,
- ◆ emergence of consensus about the best or most effective practice models,
- ◆ development of working agreements and strategic plans that embrace systems integration as a concept and move the integration effort forward,
- ◆ development and implementation of pilot projects that demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of an integrated approach to care for clients with multiple problems, and
- ◆ institutionalization of integrated services as manifested at the program level by agencies mobilizing integrated models of care.

Over time it will become clear whether the efforts of the change agent are meeting with success. In evaluating the work of the change effort, remember to accommodate the discomfort and resistance the change agent will encounter from a range of stakeholders.

Final Thoughts

As the author of *The Change Agent's TOOL BOX* series, I functioned as a change agent in the King County, Washington, system for 10 years. I found the work to be stimulating,

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challenging and highly rewarding. The support of strong supervisors who were able to tolerate the tensions that my efforts at times created was one of the most essential components of my success.

From the outset, the center of my work was based on the belief that the best human service systems are those that make the most sense from the perspective of the client rather than from the perspective of the funder, policy-maker, agency director or direct service provider.

Basing the goals and objectives of systems integration on a client-centered perspective made the work of integration far more palatable to multiple systems that were initially quite heavily invested in an unintegrated approach to care.

In King County, systems integration has become synonymous with putting the client's needs first and creating services that are structured and delivered to best promote client stabilization and recovery. As a result, the goal of integrated systems has become somewhat irresistible to most stakeholders.

With these observations, *The Change Agent's TOOL BOX* comes to a conclusion. NTAC encourages system managers and change agents throughout the nation to continue in their efforts to promote the most

effective response to clients with multiple problems including co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders.

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