THE TRANSFORMATION TEAM: AN ENABLING STRUCTURE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN ACTION

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The majority of work occurring in human service organizations (HSOs) today, is ameliorative in nature, leaving the original sources of problems in our communities or society unchanged. The current tendency is to unreflectively reproduce these ameliorative practices that at best are superficially addressing a problem, and at worst are perpetuating the issues our communities face. In this paper we bring in two key concepts from Organizational Theory to inform Community Psychology theory and practice: reflective practice and organizational learning. We demonstrate the necessity of critically reflective practice in HSOs to promote learning, critical consciousness and critical community practice, in order to create more transformative rather than ameliorative practices. Utilizing our learning from three case studies, we propose the use of a Transformation-team (T-team) model as an enabling structure for reflective practice and organizational learning. Outlining benefits as well as eight necessary conditions of a successful T-team, we delve into the possibilities that such an organizational structure can offer our HSOs. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

In his book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," Stephen Covey (1989) tells the story of a man sawing a tree. When asked by a passerby how he is progressing, the man replies that he had been sawing for the last 5 hours and feels tired and decreasingly effective. When asked if he has stopped to sharpen his saw, the man replies, "No, I am too busy sawing." Like the man in Covey's story, community-based human service organizations

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(HSOs) are too busy sawing: too busy keeping up with the demand for services and too consumed to reflect upon and learn from their action to better promote social change. Faced with overwhelming need, HSOs are compelled to act; reflection is often viewed as a distraction or a luxury they cannot afford (Bess, Prilleltensky, Perkins, & Collins, 2009; Evans, 2012). However, as Dewey (1934) warns, unreflective activity furthers enslavement "for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite, sense, and circumstance" (p. 19). This article presents a model for organizational learning (OL) and development that facilitates critical reflection in HSOs to better foster critical community practice in communities.

We will first establish the need for community-based practice that is more critical and transformative. Then we will bring in two key concepts from organizational theory–reflective practice and OL–to discuss how critically reflective practice in organizations can promote learning, critical consciousness, and critical community practice. Last, we introduce the model of the organizational transformation team (T-team) as an enabling structure for reflective practice and OL and describe what we have learned about what makes T-teams effective and sustainable.

CRITICAL COMMUNITY PRACTICE

Much community-based practice by HSOs is at best ameliorative, where the original source of the problem in communities or society is left unchanged and likely not discussed. Staff in HSOs do not have the time to critically reflect on their shared "epistemologies of practice" (Schön, 1995), how these practice ideologies are shaped or constrained by external forces, and the programs and practices that result (Hasenfeld, 2010). Thus, the current tendency is to unreflectively reproduce ameliorative practices that become so ingrained in the organization's culture as to be taken for granted and left unchallenged (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007; Schön, 1984). What is needed is a community practice that is critical and transformative. Critical community practice is "action based on critical theorizing, reflection, and a clear commitment to working for social justice through empowering and transformative practice" (Henderson, 2007, p. 1). It is grounded in an understanding that the roots of most community problems lie in patterns of systemic poverty, disadvantage, social exclusion, and oppression that are manifestations of structural inequalities and social divisions within society as a whole (Butcher, 2007).

A model of critical community practice in HSOs has four interlocking components: critical consciousness, critical theorizing, critical action, and critical reflection (Barnett, 1997; Brechin, 2000; Butcher, Banks, Henderson, & Robertson, 2007). *Critical consciousness* comprises the assumptions, value commitments, dispositions, and mindset that necessitate practitioners to enhance their creative and analytical skills and consists of two key components: a critique of social conditions that lead to suffering and an awareness that people can change these conditions (Freire, 1970; Prilleltensky, 2011). *Critical theorizing* is about praxis; putting forward practical models with a critical theoretical base to better understand the current situation and to suggest alternative futures and strategies for change. *Critical action* refers to coordinated action by a variety of actors through social movement building and collective action. Finally, *critical reflection* prompts community practitioners to engage in active, ongoing, public, collective reflection upon practice and the social and political context in which practice is embedded.

Engaging in critical practice requires that HSOs reflect on the nature of their practice, to use the experience of practice to gain a shared understanding of community, society,

and social change, and to judge theory in terms of practice and practice in terms of theory. This component of critical reflection and its connection to OL is the focus of this article.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN HSOS

A HSOs ability to develop a learning culture that promotes critical reflection in and on action is a precondition to critical community practice. Dewey (1994) defines reflective action as a behavior that involves active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads. The process of reflection involves a "standing back" from and systematic reviewing of what has been happening. Reflective practitioners reflect on their work and the social and political context in which their work is embedded (Dokecki, 1992; Newbrough, 1995; Schön, 1984). Freire (1970) describes the interaction between action, reflection, and learning as an iterative, interactive, and ongoing process where reflection and action inform one another. Reflection without action is stagnation and action without reflection is just action for action's sake. Reflective practice emancipates us from merely routine activity and enables us to direct our actions with purpose: "It enables us to know what we are about when we act" (Schön, 1984, p. 17).

Critical reflection is not a private phenomenon. It occurs in the midst of practice and is best shared in the presence of others (Raelin, 2001). OL is not attainable through individual self-reflection; it requires team learning (Senge, 2000), sharing, and exploring experiences with others, or what Mercer (2000) calls "interthinking" (thinking together). Public reflection and dialogue increase learning, open us to data that run contrary to our comfortable stance, and submit thinking and practice to the critical gaze of others (Raelin, 2001; Weil, Romm, & Flood, 1997).

Embedded reflective processes are integral to individual, group, and organizational development. Given the right conditions, organizational members recognize the different assumptions and models in use and are willing to expose them to critical examination in a nondefensive manner. Every piece of action may prompt the organization to reflect on what took place and could lead to a review of the assumptions, values, and theory used to interpret and deepen the understanding of the dynamics of their practice (Butcher, 2007). An organization, supportive of reflective practice, would require a learning system within which groups could surface conflicts and dilemmas and subject them to productive public inquiry (Schön, 1984).

THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The learning organization is one that has the capability to adapt to changes in its environment and to learn from the lessons of its members and organizational experience (DiBella & Nevis, 1998). Simply put, if an organization has the capacity to support critical reflection and respond to these lessons by altering organizational practice, then the organization can be characterized as a learning organization. The distinct features of learning organizations include greater participation and accountability by a larger percentage of employees; continuous learning at the systems level; knowledge generation and sharing; capacity for systems thinking; and a culture and structure of rapid communication and learning (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Wheatley, 1994). Through creating systems that support conscious attention to reflecting on goals,

disjuncture, and value systems, learning organizations provide opportunities for different ways of viewing the work. Learning organizations create the safety and space for critical reflection and mechanisms for sharing and infusing new ideas through the organization.

Most theorists agree that OL primarily occurs when individuals and teams engage in dialogue and reflection, ask questions, and identify and challenge values, beliefs, and assumptions (Raelin, 2001; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1996). Senge (1990) describes how deeply held mental models must be made explicit and challenged for real learning to occur in organizations. Learning, then, encompasses the acquisition of not just new or different skills or competencies but also new or different cognitive processes (Agashae & Bratton, 2001). OL is tied to the individual and individual learning, but system-level learning requires an organization that is adequately prepared to take in this learning so that it becomes usable knowledge in the service of the agreed vision (Marsick, 2000). Organizations can create the conditions for OL by embedding reflection and learning into the culture of the organization.

BUILDING A LEARNING CULTURE IN HSOs

Schein (1996) describes organizational culture as the "set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments" (p. 236). An organization with a culture of learning is one that "supports and encourages the collective discovery, sharing and application of knowledge" (Gill, 2010, p. 49). To build a learning culture in an organization, risk taking, action learning, feedback, and reflection must be rewarded. Building this culture includes the intentional development of a "culture of inquiry" (Gill, 2010, p. 29) in which individuals and teams are excited to learn and feel supported in experimenting with and surfacing difficult topics. It is imperative that individuals and teams *learn how to learn*, becoming conscious of individual learning styles and removing bureaucratic and cultural barriers to learning (Senge, 1990).

Leadership is key in developing and building a learning culture. Leaders help create conditions in which people are better able to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models. This process of engagement includes (a) formal leadership modeling the necessary learning and communication that builds and supports the learning culture, and (b) informal leadership, occurring across the organization as staff and volunteers engage in leading the learning process (Gill, 2010). Schein (2004) and Agashae & Bratton (2001) suggest that leaders play a crucial role in creating, shaping, and embedding culture in an organization through, among other things, what they pay attention to, how they react to crisis, what actions and behaviors they model and coach, the design of physical space, and how they reward employees. Leadership is intertwined with culture formation, evolution, transformation, and destruction and leaders need emotional strength, depth of vision, perception and insight, and the ability to work with organizational members to develop a culture of learning in organizations (Schein, 2004).

THE T-TEAM

One challenge for leaders in HSOs is that management concepts such as the learning organization and organizational culture are too abstract with limited practical relevance

(Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008; Örtenblad, 2007, 2013). In our experience with HSOs, OL sounds desirable in theory, but without an instruction manual for how to put the theory into practice, practitioners do not see the immediate utility. The T-team is a practical way for HSOs to put into action organizational theories of critical reflection and OL.

Modeled to some degree on Kurt Lewin's "T-groups" (Yalom, 1995) and the idea of organizational and community change "core groups" (Bopp & Bopp, 2001), T-teams serve as organizational-enabling structures for essential reflective practice and OL (Evans, 2012; Evans et al., 2011, 2007). T-teams are small (8 to12 people), intraorganizational groups that meet regularly. These meetings provide protected space for dialogue, for opportunities for members to increase their understanding of organizational issues, to examine shared assumptions, and to reflect on organizational practice. They offer protected time for practitioners to engage in democratic dialogue about purpose, direction, and strategy and encourage innovation and experimentation. In addition to serving as incubators of creative ideas, these T-teams help organizations discover individual and collective benefits of deep dialogue and reflection and explore ways to diffuse these new cultural norms through the organization.

In the following sections, we provide examples of how three HSOs have put T-teams into organizational practice to support critical reflection and learning. Data for these cases are drawn from individual interviews, focus groups, and our ongoing participation as action researchers.

Island Center

Island Center was founded in 1969 to serve young people and families in crisis. The agency originated as a volunteer run, community-based counseling program for runaways and homeless teens and for teens experiencing drug- and alcohol-related problems. The professional counselors, social workers, crisis workers, and volunteers of Island Center have worked with teens and parents, helping them in times of crisis and providing teens with opportunities for leadership and service. Currently, there are approximately 40 staff members working in three main program areas: Crisis and Residential Services, Youth Leadership Development, and Community Counseling Services. Many in the field of youth development consider Island Center to be one of the nation's most comprehensive and innovative agencies for teens and their families.

Although many workers at Island Center entered the human service field to care for individuals and promote social justice, job demands pushed these social justice ideals to the background. Many staff members reported that they wanted to do transformative work but were simply unable to do it. The need to respond to immediate crises prevented staff from being proactive and limited them to traditional individual-level efforts. Initial discussions about how they could be more transformative led to more meetings to explore how they could bring social justice to the foreground. The organization decided to form a T-team to drive the OL and change process.

The T-team was made up of two people from each of the five departments at Island Center, with the lead author of this article joining as participant observer and action researcher. Island Center's original T-team goal involved "moving the organization towards ways of thinking and practicing that result in more transformational change in the community." The T-Team took the lead in developing a vision for the organization that was more in line with this emerging philosophy. As the group formed, participants were clear

about their desire to build a team environment that enabled open discussion and a space where they could teach each other and grow together. They acknowledged early on that although this was going to be a difficult and ambiguous process, they were committed to work with each other in this new way. The T-team space needed to be a place where they could come together and struggle with difficult issues.

During the first few months, the focus of the T-team was on clarifying personal and organizational values and on increasing their own awareness of critical practice. The T-Team initially felt a lot of energy around the need to define what they, as an organization, stood for. What is their vision for a "good community" in which young people can develop? There was also a desire to learn more about the social determinants of well-being and the inherently political nature of human service work. They planned "teach-ins" on issues that highlighted the affect that poverty, lack of health care, inadequate educational systems, low wages, and other systemic problems have on human thriving. One goal was to make visible the dominant culture of human services and how most efforts address only symptoms of larger social ills. This allowed staff to examine their organizational culture and practices against this backdrop. The teach-ins provided data, provocative stories and metaphors that raised the level of organizational self-examination.

Through incorporating different learning strategies, T-team members and others in the organization began to connect what they were doing in their work to the larger social issues in their community and in society. They began to see their culture at Island Center in a new light and to construct a new vision. Until this point, talking about the political dimension of their work had been mostly avoided. Rare were the discussions of how issues of power, social justice, and equality related to their work. They were able to begin to change their organizational culture through learning together and critically examining the ways they had been doing things. This process raised important questions about how to put their values into action. One manager described it this way:

> I think it has given me permission to think about those issues of justice and equality and figure out ways that we could live that out in my area . . . . It raises quandaries about . . . how do we do that? How does everybody get brought along? How do we define what that means . . . or how do we negotiate different people's understandings about it? And I think it's pushed me to think about, well, you know, what do I think is really important?

The T-team conducted an internal inquiry into organizational values, and they brought their findings to the T-team meetings to make sense of the value statements and stories. They worked to create an organizational philosophy that captured these values and communicated them in a meaningful way. There was a sense that this philosophy could potentially guide the work of the organization and be a tool for assessing current strategies, possible collaborations, and future opportunities. This philosophy could also guide and drive the organizational change process.

The creation of this philosophy was one of the moments during the change process when tremendous energy and excitement were generated. Staff valued that this was their "statement to the world and to each other." After the rollout, the T-Team focused on integrating the philosophy into the organizational culture. The team felt a need to "vaccinate" staff with the philosophy and to find a participatory way to manifest it through their practices. Organizational meetings were held to discuss the new direction and to envision ways to put these ideas into action.

The Helping House

The Helping House (THH) was founded in 1939 as a response to the growing and emergent needs of people living in poverty. Throughout its history THH has worked tirelessly to address poverty in their community. Currently, the organization works in four programmatic areas: addiction services, community services, family services, and residential services. THH has programs ranging from a homeless shelter for men, to community centers and a food distribution program helping over 42,000 adults, families, and children every year.

Five years ago THH hired a new executive director who made it his mission to work in partnership with staff to co-create a positive organizational culture and to surface and reflect on deeply held assumptions in the organization. He promoted the importance of reflection and staff and volunteer engagement in developing a culture of reflection. Up until this point, the organization had been focusing its attention on putting out fires. What had developed over time was a culture of reactive work responding to pressing community needs that left the organization unfocused and its staff stretched. This overwhelming need to assist with food, shelter, and services for so many individuals and families prevented THH from taking the time to reflect and to address root causes of the problems their constituents were experiencing.

The second author of this article was brought in as a facilitator and action researcher to support THH in a visioning and organizational change process. Throughout this process, and in the 3 years since, the core group reflected together and took on the role of the T-team. This T-team, made up of one person from each department of the organization, spent 6 months engaging over 400 partners from the organization including staff, volunteers, funders, and individuals who were accessing programs. Members of the T-team were also connecting in with their respective departments, building a culture of reflection throughout the organization. The T-team was engaged in co-constructing vision, mission, and value statements. The process was focused on developing a shared vision and creating spaces within the organization where critical questions could be raised and reflected upon. Each of the 400 participants was asked to share a story and image that represented what THH meant to them. This information was brought back to the T-team for group reflection, dialogue, and meaning making.

The second author, in her role as trusted facilitator and critical friend (Evans, in press), asked provocative questions to open space for critical reflection and action. The goal of the reflective process was to create a space where the organization and its T-team could visualize a new way forward that was proactive, conscious of systemic inequalities, while also remaining true to their community's needs.

One conversation that changed the course of the T-team's work started as a general discussion while writing the vision statement. An impassioned dialogue began between two separate phrases: "having needs met" and "thriving." This turned into a deep reflection on the understanding of power and privilege in communities. The question arose as to whether it was enough to provide for those who are suffering, versus the importance of providing conditions through which people could thrive in their personal and community lives. This moment in particular created a dramatic shift in the T-team's conceptualization of the organization and how it needed to frame its work moving forward. The final living document was, and continues to be, used to hold the organization accountable in challenging power structures and to create long-lasting and transformative change in their community.

Their work became an iterative process of critical reflection, visioning, broader engagement and training components as needed. As a T-team, this space was used to ask tough questions and to surface assumptions about the organization around how their work moves (or does not move) them forward in their vision of a community "where all can belong and thrive."

Three years later, this team continues to utilize their strong and critical foundation to continuously and iteratively push forward. This has meant removing or closing some programs and rebuilding or reimagining others. This work aims to tackle root causes of poverty and stay true to their co-created vision. With a focus on open discussion and what the executive director refers to as "a continuous loop of reflection," THH has continued to protect this space for critical reflection. The executive director recently shared that this process is so deeply built into the organizational culture that staff at all levels now ask themselves at every turn: "How does this decision ensure that people in our organization and our community will belong and thrive?"

Imagine Miami–Dade

Imagine Miami–Dade (IMD) was founded in 1996 to serve as the anti-poverty civic engagement hub for Miami-Dade County. Since that time, IMD has developed significant relationships and learning partnerships related to building prosperity in the Miami community. Their mission—to support individuals, organizations, and communities in creating a more just, equitable, and caring society—is addressed by identifying and launching innovative and proven programs and practices that help communities to thrive. IMD seeks to promote economic self-sufficiency and participation in civic and community life by inspiring people to get involved and preparing them to step up to leadership roles that lead to long-term community transformation.

Over the past few years, leadership at IMD has been positioning the organization as a community convener, facilitator, network weaver, and lead organization for a range of civic initiatives. This cultural and practical shift required examination of currently held shared beliefs about the social issues IMD is trying to address and the constituents they are seeking to benefit. Through their participation in the SPEC Learning and Changing by Doing project (Evans et al., 2011)–a 3-year action research partnership between university researchers and community organizations–they were encouraged to develop a T-team to guide their change process and to act as the "conscience" of the organization. IMD structured their T-team with staff of different levels from all departments in the organization meeting biweekly for 2 hours at an offsite location. Members created ground rules and shared in the facilitation and note-taking responsibilities.

The initial focus of the T-team at IMD was on changing the organizational culture to improve communication and trust. At the time the T-team was formed, there was a sense that there was a general lack of interpersonal trust at all levels within the organization. The T-team believed that this was blocking them from achieving their mission and that it was important to bring this out into the open to resolve. Over time, reflections produced a shared understanding that the communication and trust issues could be understood as an individual-level challenge (lack of skills, low emotional intelligence, personal style, etc.) and an organizational-level problem (mixed messages from leadership, lack of organizational focus, lack of planning, etc.). This allowed them to create a small task force to develop action steps that, over time, led to some success in improving communication and trust in the organization.

Experiencing some success with this process led the T-team at IMD to take on an organizational values clarification process. Similar to Island Center and THH, the folks at IMD realized that clarifying shared organizational values was necessary to align the organization around the core values that underpin their organizational, community, and collective work. T-team members engaged in values discussions in their department teams brought information back to the T-team for analysis, and then drafted an organizational values framework that they presented back to staff for discussion at a retreat. The goal for the retreat was to build a shared understanding of the cultural pillars, to own them (personally, as members of teams, and organizationally), and to relate them to the overall vision, mission, and theory of change of the organization.

For the first two years, the T-team was a productive and critical space that moved organizational work forward, built morale, and lent itself to the development and implementation of a more critical practice. However, as time went on and the demands of work encroached, the focus and cohesiveness of the group diminished and energy continued to fizzle. With staff turnover, this venue, once an environment for deep reflection and dialogue, became a negative space for complaining and was perceived as a drain on staff time. After a short hiatus, the new executive director is restarting the T-team with new membership and hopes to open up space again for reflecting on the internal dynamics of the organization and work they do in the community.

SUMMARY OF THE BENEFITS OF T-TEAMS IN HSOs

Through our work with these three HSOs–and others not presented here–we have uncovered four primary benefits of T-teams in organizations: (a) to enhance cross-team dialogue leading to individual and organizational learning; (b) to help integrate critical reflection into organizational routines and culture; (c) to provide an opportunity for shared values clarification; and (d) to promote broader participation in organizational development.

Enhances Cross-Team Dialogue Leading to Individual and Organizational Learning

The primary benefit of T-teams for the organizations featured here is the opening up of opportunities for individuals from different parts of an organization to share ideas, discuss successes and challenges, and learn together. These three organizations used the T-team experience to open up more opportunities for participation in organizational dialogue and decision making, cross-team dialogue and collaboration, and personal and professional development experiences. Beyond the T-teams, structures and spaces were created for small and large groups to come together to learn from and struggle with each other in order to learn. One staff member from Island Center reflected on this organizational change in this way:

> I do think we are doing a bit more collaboration internally than we had before. I feel like there is more excitement within Island Center across teams to kind of work together, talk about things, and try new things. I know the shelter is working really hard at making some changes and including more of us in the discussion.

The T-team structure and process gives staff members a chance to interact and build relationships with individuals in other departments with whom they would not normally

interact. This has the effect of connecting people and providing new opportunities for staff members to participate in organizational development activities. One staff member stated:

> That experience was a time when I have been in this agency for 2 1/2 years. . . . One of the biggest things that came out of it for me was interacting with people from the agency who I have never–like, I couldn't even remember people's names after 2 years because I saw them so infrequently. So that was just really powerful for me. Like, the agency for me before that was, just, whatever was going on over there didn't have a lot of impact over here. And so that was very big for me. I felt more connected to the agency.

As more opportunities for dialogue and reflection are created, people were able to get to know each other in deeper ways. Beyond the T-team borders, staff members were having more formal and informal discussions about their work and learning about each other's experiences.

Integrates Critical Reflection Into Organizational Culture and Routines

At their best, T-teams in HSOs are protected spaces for a different kind of organizational discourse. One staff member at IMD proclaimed that their T-team was "the only thing in our world that isn't filled with tasks." Although diffusing the practice of critical reflection and learning beyond the T-team is challenging, critical reflection practices began to ripple out as members engaged with their own departmental teams in similar practices. The success of critical reflection at the T-team level created openings for departments to engage in a similar process, to align programmatic actions with the changing organizational values and missions. This ripple effect helps develop a culture of critical reflection, where all staff members are provided the space and support to ask provocative questions, challenge assumptions, and critique organizational practice.

Provides an Opportunity for Shared Values Clarification

Values clarification took center stage in all of the featured T-teams. The teams were intentional in creating space to research, discuss, unpack, and articulate their shared values. Each T-team used participatory processes to open the discussion to staff at all levels for critical dialogue. The values were then crafted and refined through iterative and reflective processes. As they reexamined existing value statements and articulated new ones, T-team members worked to ensure that there was a shared understanding of what these values meant and how they can be applied in their everyday work. Many organizational theorists suggest that organizational change, built on values, is a key factor in successful efforts and stress the need for reeducation of norms and values to drive change (O'Toole, 1995; Resnick & Patti, 1980; Senge, 1990).

Promotes Broader Participation in Organizational Development

Leadership in each of these organizations viewed the T-team as a way to engage staff at all levels in meaningful organizational discussions and decision making. For example, the executive director at THH works to engage his staff, from upper management through to the custodial staff, in the "culture of reflection." His hope is that this process will help

staff and volunteers feel safe in raising issues and challenging assumptions held by the organization. At IMD, the director reported that the T-team helped her learn to let go of control:

> The T-team process was tremendously beneficial for me personally as I learned to let go of control in a setting with others who were committed and competent for the work at hand. It was very freeing to create the space where others' leadership could flourish–always my intention, but not fully realized.

By increasing opportunities for broader engagement, T-teams are a way for organizations to begin to reduce some of the inherent power differentials in typically hierarchical organizations. A strategy in organizational processes that comprises both participative decision making and empowerment facilitates planning and strategic development from the bottom-up rather than top down.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR T-TEAMS

Through our action research partnership with these three organizations and several others not featured here, we have documented many aspects of T-teams' structures and processes in the context of diverse organizational cultures and ongoing community practices. In addition to highlighting the strengths of utilizing a T-team structure for learning and action in HSOs, we are able to identify eight necessary ingredients for successful organizational T-teams: (a) organizational readiness, (b) leadership buy-in and participation, (c) T-team purpose and structure, (d) attention to inclusion and diffusion, (e) balance of learning and action, (f) dialogue, (h) linking organizational development to critical community practice, and (i) the role of the critical friend.

Organizational Readiness

Although the three organizations presented here were capable and ready to engage in a new way of doing things, this has not been the case for all of the organizations that we have encountered in our work. Organizational readiness is the extent to which organizational members believe that change is needed and beneficial and are psychologically and behaviorally prepared to implement change, as well as the extent to which the organization is capable of implementing change (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007). Other organizations engaged in these and other projects were not ready to alter existing routines and had trouble initiating and sustaining this type of OL practice. Even in the organizations featured here, as staff members came and went, it was challenging to sustain a readiness and openness to reflective practices. Introducing an innovation such as a T-team requires a shared belief that it is needed in the first place and that building it into organizational routines can be useful and successful.

Leadership Buy-In and Active Participation

Leaders not only hold the power to institute learning organization practices, but they are also in a position of power to set the tone on the implementation process. Having leaders engaged with the T-team in an active and open fashion lends credibility to the process and decreases barriers to participation and sustainability. In our three organizations, we

saw organizational leaders who were actively involved in T-team discussions and decisions. This process can be challenging for leaders because embracing the T-team process means opening organizational practices to critique and deconstruction. How leaders react to feedback, critical reflection, and shared decision-making can enhance or stifle OL and critical practice moving forward (Ortenblad, 2013). Although not without significant missteps along the way, these leaders were actively engaged with and supported their staff as they implemented new ways of working together.

T-Team Purpose and Structure

As reflected in the title of this article, we believe that T-teams can serve as a practical enabling structure for OL in action. In our three cases, T-teams were the "hardware" that ran the "software" of people's interactions (Labonte & Laverack, 2001). Like any team, committee, or task force in organizations, it is important that group members and the organization at large understand why the group is needed and what they are trying to achieve. Without a clearly articulated purpose, teams risk floundering and working at cross-purposes. Our organizations generally described their T-teams as the "conscience of the organization." As action researchers and partners in the process, we advised the T-teams to focus their purpose on "moving the organization towards ways of thinking and practicing that result in more transformational change in the community" and to link the OL efforts to critical community practice.

In addition to the need for clarity of purpose, many of our partners stressed the need for adequate structure when implementing a T-team, including the importance of norms for group interaction, consistency of meetings and membership, clear roles, and a basic agenda before and notes after meetings. Some groups rotated the roles of facilitator, note taker, timekeeper, observer, and someone to capture action steps. Assigning roles promoted active participation and shared responsibility. Also, groups found it essential to build time at the end of meetings to reflect on their group process.

Inclusion and Diffusion

Some organizational members have more opportunities than others to fully participate in the T-team and other OL activities. Some members were able to dedicate time for dialogue and reflection, depending on position or job demands, but many members were not able to; this is especially true in direct service areas in which workers are not as free to take time away from job demands to participate in the reflective process. When T-teams engage more members of the organization in development processes, and share their work more broadly, the insider–outsider tension is reduced. In their research on shifting paradigms in community mental health organizations, Nelson, Lord, and Ochocka (2001) found that these participatory processes help bring resistance and conflict into the open so that they can be dealt with more effectively (Nelson et al., 2001). As a facilitator to the process at THH, the second author used her relationship with organizational leaders to urge the T-team to engage staff from all levels of the organization.

To be able to shape the broader organizational culture, T-teams need to be both a catalyst and a vehicle for broader OL practices. The T-team meeting cannot be the only place where OL is supported. Unfortunately, this culture of learning and reflective practice was not consistently diffused throughout each of the organizations represented here. Especially in the early stages of implementation, the T-teams were the place for

reflection and learning, but when the meetings ended, so too did the commitment to new ways of working.

Diffusion of these practices into other organizational settings–all-staff meetings department meetings, board meetings, supervision, etc.–is challenging and requires being deliberate and purposive. For example, in IMD, department directors experimented with building "open space" into their department meetings to free up time for shared reflection on the work of their departments. At Island Center, staff established a monthly "First Friday" all-staff event and "teach-ins" to provide an additional learning and reflecting space that enabled the T-team to directly engage all of the organization in dialogue about substantive organizational issues.

Dialogue

Many organizational theorists have noted the importance of dialogue in OL and change (Addleson, 2000; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge, 2000; Weil, 1998). A process comprising organizational reflection, learning, and change is created, produced, and maintained by and within communication. We observed the importance of dialogue in these T-teams in two interactive forms: learning and action (Ford & Ford, 1995). Teams engaged in dialogue for learning are interacting around the question, How do we understand this? Teams engaged in dialogue for action are responding to the question, Given our current understanding, how do we act? Dialogues for learning often led to action, and dialogues for action often involved dialogues for learning to have a shared understanding about what action is for. In these organizations, it was essential that the T-teams spent many hours in dialogue, building shared understandings, common ground, mutual trust, and plans for informed action.

Balance of Learning and Action

Although genuine dialogue is essential, we often observed displays of frustration around the pace of change and limited action resulting from discussions. The efforts to make the process as inclusive, participatory, and deliberate as possible came at the expense of the relative efficiency that some were accustomed to in their normal day-to-day work. After one particularly lengthy discussion on core values at IMD, one skeptical staff member asked: "Honestly, I have a question: Is this gonna change anything? [laughter] I'm sorry, I just have to ask that question: Is talking about this going to change anything?" At other times, there was a tendency to rush to solutions and to fix "problems," rather than spending the necessary time collecting information and learning together about the issues. There is pressure to act upon and to define problems as they are given (Argyris & Schon, 1996). A balance must be found between progress in organizational development and providing enough time for inclusive and deliberate learning and action process.

Linking Organizational Learning to Critical Community Practice

As we described above, we believe that OL in community-based HSOs is an essential precondition for critical community practice. T-teams are one mechanism for organizations to hold themselves accountable to a type of community practice that is transformative. However, T-teams can become focused on internal operations of their organizations and neglect subjecting their external practice to critical examination and modification. At one point, the T-team at IMD realized that they were spending all of their time on clarifying

organizational values with no connection to their community practice or organizational vision. At Island Center, although real clarity was reached regarding who they were as an organization, they struggled to understand how that translated into changes in their community practice. How could they put their newly generated philosophy into action? Despite providing an enabling structure for reflection and learning, without critical examination of community practice and an openness to changing practice in light of new understandings T-teams fall short of their transformative potential.

The Critical Friend

In our work with community-based HSOs, we have become convinced of the value of playing the role of critical friend: a trusted partner who pushes for a higher degree of critical reflection and critical practice. As we have defined elsewhere (Evans, in press, 2012), in a context of trust and mutual respect, the critical friend joins with research and action partners to subject community practice to deliberate and continuing critique to illuminate relations of power and shape action to better achieve mutually agreed upon social justice objectives.

Through sustained partnerships, we develop committed relationships with community partners who allow us to be seen as equal companions in the process. This genuine "friendship" enables open and honest dialogue and means we can hold up a critical mirror to our partners, if necessary. Playing the role of critical friend is about working alongside individuals and organizations to reveal how existing beliefs and practices may be antithetical to their collective values and goals. Modeling respectful critique in T-teams opens up opportunities for more people to step into the role of the critical friend and normalizes organizational and social critique as part of the learning change process. A commitment to critique can foster the type of reflective practice that enables organizations to better align practices with social justice objectives.

"BUT THERE'S NO TIME!" THE OVERWHELMING REQUIREMENTS OF CONTINUITY

Although creating the necessary conditions for success helps reap some of the benefits of T-teams in HSOs, implementing T-teams is not without its challenges. The primary challenge to reflective practice and OL through T-teams is both a real and a perceived lack of time. This is the message we heard over and over again in our partner organizations. There is too much to be done, too many people needing help, and too many fires to put out. Stepping away from these pressing needs to think deeply with others about the organizational purpose seems like a luxury they can ill afford. One staff member at IMD went as far as to say, "Taking time out of my schedule to attend a two-hour meeting makes me feel more stressful than I already am." Here's how one crisis worker at Island Center vividly described this challenge:

> So in the midst of all that is happening it's just it's hard to even be able to take a breath and start to conceptualize. It's just kind of like I can't hear that right now because I've got two kids who are fixing to fight, a mom on the phone crying, and a crisis walk-in. And really that kind of stuff does happen, you know. So there's just so much that already goes on to ask for more–and that wears you out mentally to try to think of something different. And it's hard.

Given the immense challenges HSOs are facing, it is understandable that they become absorbed in the requirements of survival. Programs and services must be provided in response to an ever-increasing demand against the backcloth of reduced funding. There is real pressure from funding agencies to achieve certain metrics and to demonstrate specific outcomes. Even when staff members understand the value of taking the time to reflect on their practices, it can feel like their time could be better spent on more pressing tasks demanding attention. When time feels inadequate, it is easy to revert to established and understood ways of working (Ortenblad, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This type of culture change in community-based HSOs is tremendously challenging. HSOs are overwhelmed by the intense need in communities and constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors (Bess et al., 2009; Harvey, 2010; Kunreuther, 2002). These challenges are perpetuated by an entrenched nonprofit institutional context and a dominant neoliberal ideology that alters the institutional, economic, and political realities for HSOs (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2009). Fundamental change will require strategies that go beyond changing individual HSOs to transform the human service systems as a whole. One has to wonder what could be possible if HSOs had adequate resources to devote to critical reflection on community practice in this broader institutional and social context.

In this article we have attempted to provide some concrete direction in implementing key practices of the learning organization through the utilization of T-teams. We need HSOs that have both the knowledge and the power to transform communities, and not just treat or service them. This requires that organizations develop a level of critical consciousness through reflection and learning to avoid being widely out of step with the dire realities of disadvantaged communities. Those doing the complex and ambiguous work in community-based HSO settings need learning opportunities that help turn taken for granted assumptions upside down, that challenge them to see and act differently, and that restructure their relationship to the world (Weil, 1998). Although instituting T-teams in HSOs will not guarantee this type of individual and organizational learning, let alone result in transformed communities, it can help to create the conditions in HSOs where critical community practice can be explored, developed, and maintained.

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