

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

6: Preparing for Change

Including family input in program improvement likely represents a change for many TANF and child support agencies. Organizational change can be complex; it is difficult to know where and how to begin. We have divided change processes into the following three simple steps, describing each in more detail below:

1. Reflect on your organization’s readiness for change.
2. Begin a change process that establishes family input as a norm and value in your organization.
3. Sustain the change through visionary leadership and best practices.

Reflect on your organization’s readiness to include family input in program improvement

Whether including family input is new to your organization or something you already do, a good first step is forming an implementation team to help guide the change. These staff should be willing to learn about the strengths and challenges related to collecting and using family input and be committed to the success of the change.³

The implementation team should complete a readiness assessment to understand the extent to which the organization is ready to engage families in program improvement. For example, completing the [Wandersman Center Readiness Thinking Tool](#) can help your implementation team identify factors that could facilitate or impede the change you want to make.⁴ With this tool, your team can reflect on your:

- **Motivation:** The degree to which an organization wants an innovation to happen
- **Innovation-specific capacity:** What is needed to make a particular innovation happen
- **General capacity:** The organization’s overall characteristics, including culture and leadership

Program Administrators: How to Change When Change Is Hard^{1,2}

In his book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, Dan Heath builds on an elephant-ride analogy to explain two sides of human nature that are often at odds with one another—a rider and an elephant.

- The rider represents our inner rational thinker, the analytical planner, the evidence-based decision maker.
- The elephant, on the other hand, represents our emotional side, which stays put, backs away, or rears up based on feelings and instincts.

“For change to succeed,” Heath concluded, “there are three ingredients. We need paths shaped for clear and easy passage. We need riders who know where to go and can see the bright spots. And, perhaps above all, we need enthusiastic elephants.” **In short, leading change means simultaneously focusing on engaging people’s emotions, giving people clear direction and goals, and making it easy for them to stay focused on where you want them to go.**



¹ Varghese, S. “[How To Change Things When Change Is Hard](#).” 2010.

² Silva, E. and G. Clyburn. “[How To Change Things When Change Is Hard](#).” 2014.

³ Wandersman Center. “[Prevention Readiness Building Guide](#).” 2019.

⁴ Wandersman Center. “[Readiness Thinking Tool](#).” N.d.

Assessing your organization's readiness for change can help you identify areas to strengthen so you can successfully engage families in program improvement.⁵ Culture, or the organization's norms and values, will often be an area on which the team needs to focus to sustain engaging families for their feedback.

Begin a culture change that establishes family input in program improvement as a norm and value in your organization

Organizational culture change is messy and complex! Achieving a change in organizational culture requires leaders and implementation teams to maintain an adaptive and flexible mindset. Exhibit 6.1 includes several guiding principles and change strategies that can help change organizational culture. It also illustrates, through an example of establishing a Parent Advisory Council, how you can use these strategies to establish family input in program improvement as an organizational norm and value.

Guide and sustain culture change through visionary leadership and best practices

Formal and informal leaders in the organization can guide culture change through visionary leadership. Visionary leaders enthusiastically champion the change and do the following:

- **Articulate a motivating vision for change** that resonates emotionally with staff. Ideally, the vision taps into staff's intrinsic motivation.
- **Create psychological safety** for staff during the change process. The core elements of psychological safety are individual safety, team respect, and team learning.⁶ Staff should feel safe engaging in family input activities and not fear failure or retaliation from leadership. One way to build psychological safety early on is to reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.
- **Ensure there is clear alignment** between family input activities as an agency priority and staff motivation to participate. Staff should feel confident that participating in family input activities will keep them in good professional standing and not negatively impact their performance or their ability to meet program benchmarks.
- **Embed two-way communication opportunities** for staff to express areas of concern or tensions they are experiencing because of the change. This makes staff feel central to the change process and gives leadership an opportunity to communicate transparently, address areas of confusion, and alleviate concerns.
- **Socialize the change process** by communicating the change clearly and often to staff across levels in the organization and to relevant community partners and collaborators. The best mode of communication depends on the audience, but each audience should know what they are expected to do differently because of the change.

⁵ Watson, A., B. Hernandez, J. Kolodny-Goetz, T. Walker, A. Lamont, P. Imm, A. Wandersman, and M. Fernandez. "[Using Implementation Mapping to Build Organizational Readiness](#)." 2022.

⁶ Geraghty, T. "[Measuring Psychological Safety](#)." 2020.

Exhibit 6.1. Changing Organizational Culture—Lessons from the Literature⁷

Guiding principles	Change strategy action steps	What does this look like in practice? Parent Advisory Council example
Develop a guiding coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a coalition of staff to lead the change initiative based on staff members’ interests and capacities (this may be the implementation team mentioned earlier, plus additional staff) • Involve frontline staff in the coalition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form an implementation team to establish a Parent Advisory Council that can advise on state-level policy decisions. Having an implementation team helps communicate to staff that the effort is collective and includes multiple perspectives.
Communicate a clear vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate a new, shared vision widely and frequently • Communicate to build buy-in and make staff feel valued in transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the implementation team, articulate and share a clear vision for the Parent Advisory Council. • Communicate that vision to staff; ensure messaging includes <i>why</i> the Council is important, <i>how</i> it will benefit staff and families, and gives staff an opportunity to <i>provide feedback</i>. Linking the effort to broader strategic priorities or goals will also help staff understand its value.
Closely monitor progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide the change initiative into smaller, distinct projects with clear success measures • Use benchmarks to monitor implementation and progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan the steps to stand up the Council (e.g., recruiting and training Council members). • Decide what success looks like and your progress toward achieving it. Carefully planning, monitoring, and communicating progress demonstrates the importance of the effort to staff, creates shared accountability for progress, and keeps the effort visible for staff.
Change mindsets and behaviors⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure staff understand what is being asked of them, and why • Model the behavior change you want to see in others • Make sure staff have the opportunity to build skills required to behave in a new way • Adapt processes and systems so they support the changes staff are asked to make 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on how you might model what you expect of others (e.g., if you message that it’s important to collect and act on the Council’s feedback, how will you share with staff examples of the Council’s feedback leading to changes?). • Ensure staff build skills aligned to the success of the Council (e.g., have staff been trained on facilitation practices to help diffuse potential power dynamics if Council members are working directly with policymakers?). This investment in staff skills shows that this effort is part of a broader change and commitment to gathering and using family input.

⁷Gaffney, A., and R. Webster. “Promoting a Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: Final Report.” 2021.

⁸ Basford, T., and B. Schaninger. “The four building blocks of change.” 2016.

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