

Western Workforce

Colorado • North Dakota • Wyoming



With a goal of collaboratively developing and testing a workforce intervention model for child welfare that responds effectively to diverse local needs, the Western Workforce Project (WWP) addressed workforce issues at sites in four locales:

- Denver County Human Services (Denver, CO)
- Natrona County Department of Family Services (Casper, WY)
- Tribal Child Welfare Agencies (North Dakota)
 - Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes of Fort Berthold (Three Affiliated)
 - Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa

Funding for the WWP has come from the Children's Bureau (2008-2013).

On behalf of the WWP, Butler Institute staff developed a Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) and conducted assessments at each site to determine what was and what was not working at the agency. The project team conducted COHAs at baseline, mid-point, and project conclusion to assess organizational health, inform the type and characteristics of interventions, and evaluate results. Teams at three agency levels used the COHA information to develop strategies to address the issues identified.

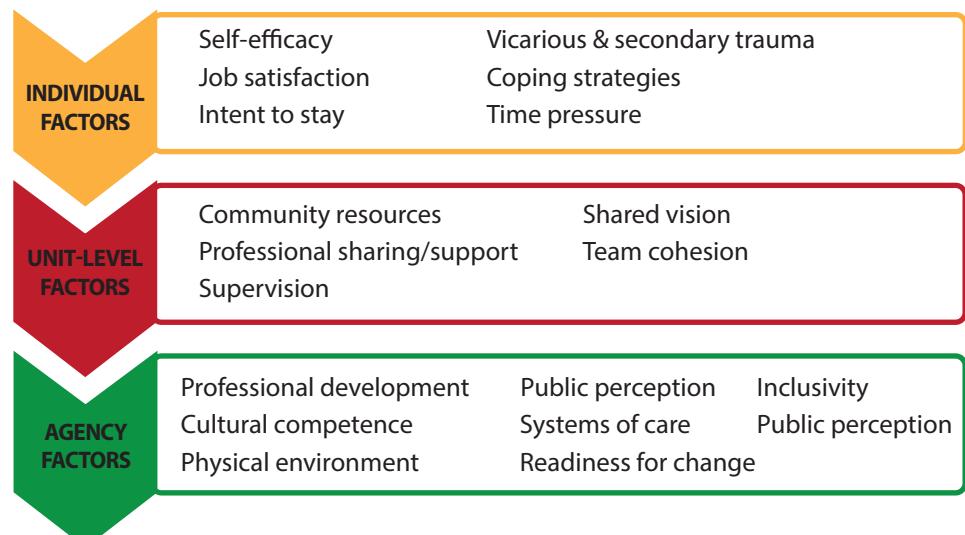
- Learning Circle (team level)
- Design Team (agency level)
- Macro Team (state/tribal/community/ level)

A Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) provides the critical foundation for success.

7 Lessons Learned

The COHA acts as both a **DIAGNOSTIC TOOL**, to gain a broad understanding of agency culture and climate, and an **EVALUATIVE TOOL** to measure changes over time as a result of the intervention. In its work conducting COHAs at four sites – at baseline, mid-point, and project conclusion – the WWP learned several important lessons. The 7 key lessons appear in numbered circles throughout this document.

The WWP categorizes organizational climate and culture into **3** areas:



Targeted workforce interventions can effectively improve agency culture and climate.

DESIGN TEAMS



Download the Design Team Manual

All project sites convened Design Teams that met regularly over the course of the five-year project, and developed and implemented actionable work plans.

Design Teams convene to identify issues most important to an agency, and to develop intervention strategies to address those issues. Members of Design Teams include representatives from all levels of the agency, ranging from case aides to executive-level staff. Through solution-focused critical thinking, Design Teams develop action plans.

The COHA results guided the Design Teams – all of which struggled with staying focused on the workforce issues that the COHA identified.

Design Teams at each site struggled with the transition from external facilitation by the WWP staff to internally organizing, managing, and facilitating their own meetings. They needed facilitation training and coaching, and longer transition periods.



LEARNING CIRCLES

Learning Circles help to build a learning culture in two ways:

1. Conducting frequent meetings that focus on improving organizational climate.
2. Implementing best practice approaches at the supervisor/worker unit level.



Participation in Learning Circles positively impacted job satisfaction over a period of 12 months.

Learning Circles were more successful in some sites than others. In the tribal sites, for example, too few staff members were available to convene both Learning Circles and Design Teams since all staff attended both meetings!

At the mid-size agency in Wyoming, the Learning Circles were slow to launch because supervisors lacked some foundational supervisory practices and were holding consistent staff meetings.

Full implementation of Learning Circles required supervision training and coaching first.

In the large urban agency in Denver, where more than 35 units implemented Learning Circles, some supervisors embraced the new practice, while others chafed under the mandate of another required activity.



[Download the Learning Circles Manual](#)

Buy-in and active participation from leadership is critical for success.

At the large urban agency in Denver, agency leaders decided (at the beginning of the project) not to be a part of the Design Team in order to let the staff take the lead on identifying issues and defining interventions.

NOT having top leadership involved in all aspects of the project turned out to be PROBLEMATIC.

Staff inferred from the absence a lack of interest and buy-in for the project from top leadership. While this was not the case at the beginning of the project, it became increasingly more difficult to keep leadership's attention and interest as the project progressed over the years, as they were not directly engaged with staff. The smaller agency office and tribal sites did not experience this issue. In each of these locations, the agency director was a member of the Design Team. Staff viewed the directors as the change agents.

The COHA was very successful in identifying strengths and challenges associated with the workforce, and gaining a better understanding of the complex relationships among culture and climate variables.

Currently, Butler staff members are gathering human resources hiring and turnover data from each site to examine the relationship between agency culture and climate to actual turnover – rather than just intent to stay.

Staff in future workforce projects should work more intentionally with human resources in the early implementation stages to design studies that will more closely link agency culture and climate to job performance metrics.

Further study is needed to understand indicators of success for good workforce practice.

Organizational assessment and workforce interventions are important for tribal child welfare programs... but must be culturally adapted.

The COHA performed quite well in the tribal settings despite cultural differences, size, and scope of tribal child welfare agencies compared to state agencies. We do recommend substantial adaptation for use in tribal programs.

Put a communication structure in place.

Agency leaders should communicate the work and successes of the Design Team and Learning Circles to agency staff. This encourages long-term sustainability of these efforts.

Depending on the size and structure of the organization, the intervention needs to be flexible. Implementing a Design Team and Learning Circles in a small tribal organization may be overwhelming. Listen to the groups and the organization, and adjust as necessary.

Foster flexibility.

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