Creating an Agency Culture

A Model for Common Humanity

by EILEEN C. LYONS

The after school arena can provide exquisite opportunities for mutual aid, cooperative learning, community building, and individual growth and change that too few settings, including schools, are able to offer consistently and coherently.

In some after school programs, for example, the adults with whom children develop relationships hold to the goals of connecting with children first and teaching children second. As a result of that shift in priorities, many children who do not thrive in school flourish in the after school setting, not because of an absence of expectations, but rather because staff practice a broad acceptance and appreciation of children's needs, challenges, and limitations. The emphasis on the "relational" opportunities and obligations of the program sets the stage for staff, children, and families to develop supportive alliances in promoting the child's overall development and learning. Indeed, when children feel "connected" to the staff and to the agency community, their academic performance and interest in schoolwork show marked improvement (Schaps, Lewis, and Watson 1996, p. 29).

The axiom that encourages staff to proactively address and work with the "whole" social child similarly guides the after school practitioner as he or she works with the child as learner. In after school settings, staff are dedicated to doing "whatever it takes" to help a child to learn. At its best, the after school setting offers untold opportunities for a spirited pursuit of creative learning. The specific life circumstances of the child will dictate whether that learning provides an ideological counterpoint to the school day or a wonderful extension and celebration of the school day's learning.

The practice of after school programming is rooted in both the progressive education movement and the field of social group work. According to the field of social group work, it "emerged from the settlement, Y's and community centers, also recreation and progressive education movements" (Gitterman, 1986, p. 29). It is now up to us to identify our connections with these movements and institutions, to articulate the theories and philosophies that shape our work, and to resurrect the common language, theory and methods that have heretofore intuitively guided our work. Ultimately, the field may distinguish itself by integrating the best of many fields, and in particular by blending and melding social group work and educational schools of thought.

Specific features that distinguish the field of after school programs can be readily identified. One such feature is the agency culture, a deeply nuanced and dynamic organism that is born out of the values, relationships, rules, practices, and history of the organization. Its power can obfuscate or enhance effective practice. When skillfully constructed, the agency culture instills myriad positive values of community, interpersonal relationships and learning into the lives of young people, their families and staff. Because it is dynamic, it evolves, and can change—for better or worse—over time. The agency milieu, like any successful garden, requires constant and careful tending.

The Agency Setting: A Unique Opportunity

Every after school program and youth organization has an opportunity to create a culture that values what is good and right for our children, an Eden if you will, where the best human qualities are practiced, learned, and celebrated. The culture of the agency should continually evolve as a result of the participation and conscious choices of its stakeholders—in this instance the participants in the program, principally children and family members—and the purposeful direction and deliberate guidance of its staff.

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Thus described, the agency milieu becomes a defining characteristic of the after school arena. Understanding the way we create our agency environments requires us to examine our most fundamental beliefs about what helps children to flourish, related methods of intervention, and the knowledge base and theoretical frameworks that guide our thinking, decision-making, and actions. To proactively shape the agency milieu requires us to examine our core values and their application. A variety of basic issues must be explored, including: the nature of the relationship between the child and the youth worker; the potential to use the setting or community as an agent for individual, group, and social change; the stanchions that support and validate the role of the worker; and, the expectations of both the child and the worker.

The organization's staff must consciously and deliberately create a culture with positive norms, values, relationships, and challenges plus a variety of learning opportunities—developmental, social, educational, and recreational. Viewed as a whole, this medium constitutes the agency milieu. It is greater than any single staff person or participant, yet captures and amplifies the voices of all its stakeholders.

All too often, the "culture" of the agency is taken for granted. It may emerge haphazardly as a consequence of a charismatic leader, the values of the professional majority, or the neighborhood in which it is located. In some instances, the culture is shaped by workers' identification with the clients they serve. For example, in the field of peer substance abuse counseling, a distinctive set of working principles is rooted in the experiences of its formerly addicted counselors. While all of these factors may influence the agency culture, and may contribute positive values, culture should not result arbitrarily as a function of the personality or profession that "wins out" or wields the most power. It should be a considered choice. Neither is it a one-time decision. The culture of an agency, like a garden, requires constant pruning, weeding, and cultivation. At the root of many organizational problems such as staffing conflicts, low client attendance, and poorly planned programs is the powerful specter of a culture that has randomly and capriciously emerged.

Collins and Porras, discussing the corporate world, note that "companies that enjoy enduring success have core values and a core purpose" (1996, p. 65).

> Core ideology defines the enduring character of an organization—a consistent identity that transcends product or market life cycles, technological breakthroughs, management fads, and individual leaders. Core ideology provides the glue that holds an organization together as it grows, decentralizes, diversifies, expands globally, and develops workplace diversity. . . . Core values are the essential and enduring tenets of an organization. A small set of timeless guiding principles, core values require no external justification, they have intrinsic value and importance to those inside the organization. (p. 66)

Nine Central Principles

This paper explores nine central principles that constitute a Model for Common Humanity, a model which can be used to guide the continuing development of the agency culture. Its central tenets are derived primarily from theories of social group work that help to explain the leadership, development, and dynamics of small groups.

Regardless of the mission of the agency, its target population, cultural or other influences, the model can be used effectively. The agency culture or milieu, as defined in this model, transcends individual personalities and programming. It provides a foundation upon which all programming and relationships rest. Its guiding principles call for the active participation of its stakeholders in its ongoing evolution. Furthermore, each principle espouses core values and methods that constitute a framework to guide the relationships, interactions, and expectations between and among all people in the community.

While the nine building blocks intersect and overlap, they each address specific areas of the agency culture. For example, the **Needs Dialogue** and the **Purpose, Values, and Expectations** sections offer a method for framing an understanding of the nature of the community and its work. **Adaptation** defines the workers' responsibility to help people enter into and become a part of the community. Along with Adaptation, the **Mutuality** and **Consensus-Building** sections provide specific methods that operationalize the vision; these two building blocks guide the nature of relationships between and among the members of the community. **Seeing**, **Focus**, **Impact**, and **Dynamism** help the staff and other community members to sustain the health and integrity of the agency culture.

1. Needs Dialogue

The manner in which workers view and discuss client need dictates to a large degree the nature of the helping relationship, and, in particular, the degree to which power is shared. The needs dialogue is played out every day in the agency in the ordinary exchanges that occur between staff and children and families. Yet each of these seemingly minor dialogues can reflect and champion the fundamental mission and core values of the agency culture.

> 'What's the carrot that you use to get kids into your program?' a funder once asked me. I knew what he meant, but I couldn't find the words to respond. 'There is no carrot,' I said. 'When you address youngsters' needs, they will come on their own.' 'But what's the carrot?' he persisted. I weighed the answers that he expected to hear: Great Adventure, a stipend, basketball? 'Kids want to be here,' I finally responded, 'because we let them know that we understand why they might want to be here.' I reflected out loud. 'Maybe they're lonely, or they want to make new friends, or they're trying to make some tough decisions, or they're unsure about sex, or their parents use drugs or hurt each other, or they feel angry about violence and racism. Maybe they're failing in school and feel stupid, or they want to express themselves better . . .' I was breathless. If you tell them about those "maybes," they'll come because they know you understand.

The funder's question illustrates an all-too-common view in the field of youth services, the notion that getting help is a bitter pill, and that workers must hide help-giving. That position suggests that young people are not capable of identifying the needs they want met and that we need to manipulate them in order to provide services. It implies that children and teens won't attend a program unless it's disguised as something other than what it really is.

Talking to a client and stakeholders about need goes to the heart of the work of youth practitioners. Need is not about being "needy," nor is it about "neediness." Need speaks to the essential core of what it is to be a human being who travels through the passages of life; it includes the range of physical human needs as well as relationships, imagination and passion. In discussing the concept of needs assessment for developing any group, Brandler and Roman state:

> The process of assessing the needs of clients, workers, and agencies is a complicated one. Evaluating population needs involves general knowledge about the population served. This includes factors related to culture, ethnicity, developmental stage, socioeconomic class, age, and special situation issues. (1991, p. 105)

While youngsters share common developmental needs, their individual needs may vary greatly. Some youth with whom we work are saddled with devastating personal problems such as the loss of a parent, divorce, abuse or neglect. Others may shoulder the burden of chronic school failure or bullying by their peers. Still others are struggling to become independent from their parents or to improve in areas of concrete skills such as sports, the arts, self-expression, or academia.

Need should be talked about in plain and simple language, in order to capture its essence. Its lines should be clean and pure, the antithesis of a "sales" dialogue. Often, because workers feel pressured to recruit children into a program, they will "sell" the most appealing aspects of the program, without talking with children and families about their core needs.

An agency situated in the heart of a neighborhood in which immigrant families lived had difficulty recruiting and retaining clients. Agency staff attempted to make their programs sound more and more appealing, so they offered an array of exciting recreational and art programs, stipends, and trips. Youngsters signed up, but attendance rates always fell precipitously after a short period of time.

While exploring the problem, one staff person observed that many parents forbade their children to attend because they did not trust the program. Other staff chimed in, noting that these parents distrusted many American institutions, including schools and neighborhood organizations. To counter their distrust, staff had tried to convince parents that the program was worthwhile. Assuming a different stance, staff worked together to explore the needs of the families in their neighborhood. They ultimately decided that, through the "needs dialogue," they should recognize and validate the very real tensions that these immigrant parents faced in raising their children in a place so different from their homeland. They also decided to talk with parents about their fears of losing their children to the "alluring" new culture, which included this agency.

Selling may enlist clients initially, but ultimately they may feel disappointed or betrayed. By openly discussing needs, staff can achieve a level of authenticity that establishes a firm foundation upon which to establish a continuing relationship. In the above anecdote, the staff members' capacity to recognize the compelling concerns of their client population resulted in a variety of positive outcomes. They were better able to: understand and engage clients; develop relevant programs; enlist clients as partners in the work; and, help clients to understand themselves better.

Kurland states:

> Thoughtful pre-group planning would give consideration to the following questions regarding need: 'What are the needs of the potential group members as perceived by them? the worker? the agency? other relevant and/or knowledgeable persons? Can these needs be met by the group modality?' (1978, p. 177)

These questions, Kurland suggests, should guide the pre-planning efforts of the group worker and can guide the practitioner at every stage of service delivery. The needs dialogue is an important tool for assessing the needs of the population you intend to be served, planning programs, and evaluating programs. When an authentic understanding of needs is achieved, clients will have already been enlisted as partners in the design of relevant programming.

Often, in a protective role, the worker keeps the need secret, inadvertently imposing a hidden agenda. For example, as part of a basketball league, the agency may introduce workshops on pregnancy prevention. The worker may feel that unless he or she bribes participants with something special, they will not attend the program. The recruitment effort may succeed, but when the pregnancy prevention component interrupts the basketball session, participants may feel resentful and tricked. Some may feel that yet another adult has planned a sneak attack.

The question is, will young people attend a session whose purpose is to help them think about pregnancy prevention and sex? The answer is a resounding yes, if they are enlisted to contribute their ideas and reactions in an authentic way.

When agendas are hidden, the balance of power initially shifts to the worker or agency. Hidden agendas displace responsibility; they do not allow the client to chart his or her own course—to wholly participate in his or her own goal setting and decision-making. The worker acts on the client's behalf, rather than collaborating with the client.

According to group work principles, group members and the worker must develop a shared understanding of need, which, in turn, drives the

MODEL FOR COMMON HUMANITY

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Nine Central Principles

1
Needs Dialogue

2
Purpose, Values, and Expections

3
Adaptation

4
Mutuality

5
Consensus Building

6
Seeing

7
Focus

8
Impact

9
Dynamism

development of a shared purpose (Northern 1988, p. 113; Steinberg 1997, p. 8). The value of an honest and open view of need lies at the heart of the helping relationship between the worker and the client (Shulman 1992, p. 84). The worker and client join together to establish a common view of real need, an agreement to work together; their respective roles, responsibilities, and expectations begin to emerge. The worker does not have to defend an unnamed agenda or take undue responsibility for the client's life. Rather, the worker joins with the client to advance his or her goals and agenda, setting the stage for individual empowerment and indigenous group leadership. When workers assume this stance, they assert values that have a wide-ranging impact on the agency culture or milieu.

2. Purpose, Values, and Expectations

It is essential to enlist clients and members of the organization in the ongoing development of the agency milieu. That objective is achieved when, from the very first interaction with the client, agency staff frankly articulate the purposes, mutual expectations, and values of the agency. This assertion is both grand and practical. On the one hand, it reaches towards the sky, pointing towards what is possible, what is worth striving for and dreaming about. On the other hand, it provides concrete information about how things operate in the agency, as well as a preliminary frame of reference, introducing the agency, its common language and its concepts. For example, while recruiting teenagers to join a conflict resolution group, I might say:

> We're working to end racism. We think that racism is corrosive—that when you meet it, it can take a little bit of your soul. That doesn't mean that we aren't able to talk about it—that's exactly what we want to do. We want to talk to you and others about your views because we're all affected by racism. But someday, we'd like to eliminate it from our vocabulary. No more racism.

Talking about the agency's vision and mission can inspire and move people. By stating, for example, that "this agency believes that teenagers have a right to express themselves in a safe place," hope and inspiration are offered to youngsters. We invite them to join us in our vision and to voice their own.

When clients understand the values, beliefs, and motivations of the worker and agency, they are afforded the chance to make a decision whether to join, based on the facts. When the client has information, he or she has increased power and control. The worker's role is not to coerce but rather to focus on helping the client make a personal decision. Kurland explains:

> The increased clarity of purpose for the social work practitioner and the client that results from careful planning increases the client's ability to make a clear and informed decision about whether he wishes to participate in the service offered and thus lessens client manipulation and domination by the worker and increases client self-determination." (1978, p. 175)

Ultimately, in building a community, workers, staff, and other stakeholders should share a common view of the agency purpose, a view that is driven by a shared understanding of need. Providing a physically and psychologically safe place is a sine qua non of the after school program. Keeping that in mind, the practitioner can help to guide the development of positive community norms such as respect, nonviolence, acceptance, and cooperation.

Values and expectations are intertwined and should be discussed out loud from the beginning. For example, what is the agency's stand on violence or offensive language? These issues should be raised not to declare "martial law," but rather to help agency members wrestle with and establish values and norms about how to be together, how to communicate, and how to solve problems and make decisions. As staff demonstrate that it is okay to talk about truths and even difficult topics such as racism, they set the stage for open, non-judgmental discussions about values.

The articulation of beliefs, expectations, and purpose should be wholly incorporated into the overall discussion of discipline and rules. Rules without reason constitute an autocracy; articulating values, part of a basic building block, ensures that the reasoning behind the rules is rooted in a carefully developed values system. This prospect demands an enormous personal and professional commitment from staff. It requires that they also participate in open discussion to formulate the values and belief systems of the agency. Without this basic unity, the milieu will be significantly weakened and undermined.

Adaptation

Orientations that introduce children and their families to the agency of are critical importance. Yet they are only one step in a process of “entering into” a culture that may take months for some members. A primary task for the youth worker is to help the child adapt to the agency setting and to participate fully in its activities and social relationships. Critical learning and growth take place as the child successfully adapts to this setting and its requirements for participation. It is important to recognize, however, that the agency setting may provide the child an experience that is dramatically different from his/her usual experiences, thus requiring the staff to aggressively help the child to adapt. This process of enabling adaptation defines a vital responsibility of the youth worker.

The agency’s milieu transcends any single staff person or participant, yet captures and amplifies the voices of all stakeholders.

Helping young people to adapt to and participate in the agency community is a complicated and sometimes frustrating task for the worker. Often, when children fail to connect to the communities we have lovingly created, we wonder where we went wrong. We create an “ideal” setting at our own agency, promoting values like mutual aid, respect, belonging, consensus building, and diversity, all thoughtfully designed to help kids to flourish. Yet the kids drop out, or fight us, or re-create our own worst vision of a bad classroom. Some kids insist that they want you to behave like an autocrat—use corporal punishment, be stricter, be tougher! And suddenly you are almost convinced that theirs is the better way. Indeed, the process of socializing youngsters to the agency milieu can prove to be the most challenging one for the individual worker and the staff as a whole, highlighting the critical need for a building block-supported adaptation.

The ideal agency setting or milieu may be profoundly different from the child’s life at school, at home, or in the neighborhood. Values, expectations, rules and norms may differ considerably from the child’s usual frame of reference. In some cases, children will be required to develop whole new sets of behaviors and communication styles in order to adapt successfully to this new setting.

Because it is so different, the new environment can pose particular threats and evoke certain fears in children, implicitly challenging what they have heretofore accepted as true. Thus, the child who is told at home to be “seen and not heard,” or to obey an arbitrary authority, may be overwhelmed and confused by the new contour of authority he or she encounters in this setting. This conflict of loyalty between those previously embraced values and beliefs and the new and different agency values constitutes a “normative crisis.”

Discussing the socialization of pre-adolescents into the group culture, Malekoff describes the normative crisis:

> In the style of the four questions asked during the Jewish Passover Seder, the new group member asks herself, `How is this group different from all other groups?’ The exodus, in this case is from a more traditional system of values to the experience of normative shock and finally to a new set of values for a new culture. The rules and regimen of the classroom, family, club, etc., evaporate as the new group unfolds. (1984, p. 14).

All of these changes can ripple through the child’s psyche, threatening the child’s sense of self at the deepest level.

> David left his group and sat down in the lobby right next to the exit. He appeared angry, a scowl etched across his mouth and forehead. His face was frozen—a sharp, raging contrast to the still fragile build of an early adolescent neatly dressed in a parochial school uniform. I tried for some time to elicit from him what he was so angry about. For weeks, he had tested the safety of the agency and the trust he could assign to staff. We knew a great deal about David’s background so it helped us to understand his struggle. His mother had neglected David emotionally since infancy. She appeared perpetually angry with him, and, with the least provocation, withdrew her affection. She often refused to speak to him for days on end for minor infractions such as spilling milk or failing to make his bed. I sat next to David, telling him that he looked upset and reassuring him that that was okay. With hands clenched and tears spilling from his eyes, he stared straight ahead and said, ‘I hate it here.’ ‘You hate it here,’ I empathized. ‘I don’t want to be here,’ he said. ‘I hate everybody and they just make me really mad.’ David had perfect attendance in the after school program. He was always the first to arrive and the last to go home. I knew that he

> was struggling with a tremendous sense of personal loss and pain. Our acceptance of his emotions and response to his needs evoked powerful feelings of the neglect and hurt he had coped with at home for so long. 'We would really miss you if you left,' I told him. Then I patted him on the back and said, 'I'm sorry that you're feeling so upset with us."'

Simply stated, we human beings are usually most comfortable with what we know. Thus, the staff might be convinced that the community is a positive one, but the members can feel wholly uncomfortable in it, and may even seek to recreate that with which they are comfortable. A major cause of the failure of agencies to sustain ideal cultures or to maintain their members is the insufficient amount of attention paid to the process of helping clients adapt to the new setting.

This process of enabling or assisting adaptation defines a critical function assigned to every staff person. As a useful analogue, the worker might view this function of the job as that of a tour guide, helping a visitor adjust to a new country. The tour guide explains the cultural norms, rules, values, and expectations, continually translating for the visitor what he or she observes—in the context of the understanding that it is different from the visitor's frame of reference.

Viewing oneself as a "helper" whose job is to help the child adapt to and participate in the formation of the agency culture is the central premise of this building block. When adaptation is embraced as a continuous process, and, in some cases, a long-term objective, it provides a benevolent framework from which to view children's struggles to fit in. Children are helped to recognize that the agency is a different culture in which, for example, safety and cooperation are requirements for membership. Staff makes clear to the child that adapting to this new culture may be difficult, and that the child will be offered help, time and understanding in order to succeed. As a result, discipline can be provided in a benevolent framework.

The worker struggles with the child in an alliance, the goal of which is to understand and embrace new values and adaptive behaviors without betraying the essential self. Helping a child to adapt may require considerable skill and time, so the adaptation itself should not be viewed as a means to an end but rather as a momentous outcome unto itself. Discussing the normative crisis, Malekoff states, "The group worker's awareness at this juncture, his empathy, allows him to gently move the group into new and ultimately more intimate territory" (1984, p. 15).

Finally, we ask, how do we know when the child has successfully adapted to the agency setting? Adaptation is reached when the child has internalized the norms and values of the agency, has developed positive relationships with some staff and peers, and is able to participate in the program. The possibilities for growth and change, as the child successfully adapts to the milieu, are limitless. The potential for the child to enrich the milieu is also infinite.

4. Mutuality

Who helps whom at the agency? Is this a paternalistic agency in which help or aid is dispensed to the needy? How do workers view themselves and their clients or community members? At the heart of social group work theory lies the concept of the mutual aid system, a deeply held belief that people can help each other—especially when they share the same interests or compelling needs. Schwartz states:

> Ideally, any group can establish reciprocal helping relationships among its members and become a system of mutual aid wherein members extend help to each other in working out their common problems. (1961, p. 13)

Mutual aid goes hand in hand with the development of indigenous group leadership. It requires staff to use skills that help clients to help each other. As we practitioners shape this culture, we must think about how we enable our young people to understand and appreciate mutuality—the idea of giving and receiving help, support and knowledge. Unless mutuality is incorporated into curricula, into expectations of how people should be with each other, the values associated with the needs dialogue and the articulation of beliefs are meaningless.

The group leader plays an important role in the mutual aid system and one that I suggest can be transferred to the worker's role in the community. In social group work theory, the "leader" is responsible for guiding the development of the group. She or he is not the center of power and expertise; rather, the leader's expertise is helping the group members to work together, to develop indigenous leadership and to develop ways of being and working together in order to achieve these goals. This lies at the heart of mutuality. Schwartz states:

> The important fact is that this is a helping system in which clients need each other as well as the worker. This need to use each other, to create not one but many helping relationships, is a vital ingredient of the group process

> and constitutes a common need over and above the specific tasks for which the group was formed. (1961, p. 13)

Mutuality reinforces patterns of communication that will be discussed in consensus-building, creating a web of support and sharing between and among members. Developing a system of mutual aid within the broader agency context is a goal that will assert its influence in a variety of ways. In youth agencies, establishing mutual aid as an essential value and practice of the community contributes to children's understanding of their responsibilities and roles as group and community members. Mutual aid reinforces values such as cooperation, teamwork, respect, and empathy in particular.

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5. Building Consensus

The Model for Common Humanity advocates the participation of members in the life and decision-making of the community. The principle of building consensus is designed to ensure that members' participation is not gratuitously enlisted, but that a practical method for achieving real participation is established.

Often, as in the following personal anecdote, people believe that the fairest way to make a decision is to put the issue to a vote in which the majority wins:

> Ten early adolescents sat huddled around the center's wide oak table, wrestling with a group decision: what movie to see on the next outing. The group leader identified three movies that fit the group's location, rating and schedule and then named the first movie. Some group members yelled out their reactions while others talked in small sub-groups. 'I already saw that last Sunday with my cousin!' yelled Arnold. 'I really want to see that,' Marie countered. Jackie jumped in, 'No, no, you got your way last time.' The group leader called out, 'Settle down, settle down. Let me finish naming the movies and then we'll put it to a vote.' The group quieted down. 'Drum roll please,' joked the group leader. 'The next possible movie is . . .' He named the movie and the group members burst forth with a volley of comments. Finally, the group leader held up his hand. 'Okay everybody, let's put this to a vote.' When the final vote was cast, Tawana turned to the leader and said, 'It's just not fair. The boys always get their way because there are more of them.' 'Majority wins!' yelled Jason. The group leader nodded, 'What's fair is fair.'

What's so fair about that? It may seem fair to the majority who "win" or rule the decision, but is it a fundamentally fair way of recognizing group members' needs?

Northern writes:

> It is through methods of decision-making that conflict is controlled or resolved. Groups often control conflict through a process of elimination, that is, forcing the withdrawal of the opposing individual or sub-group, often in subtle ways. In subjugation or domination, the strongest members force others to accept their points of view. In spite of its use as a democratic procedure, majority rule is an example of subjugation because it does not result in agreement or mutual satisfaction. (1988, p. 39)

"Consensus is an ideal end to controversy and diversity among group participants" (Middleman, p. 132). It requires an appreciation and recognition of all voices as well as real power sharing. Decisions are driven not so much by the exercise of power as they are by the fundamental values of diversity, inclusion, and responsible participation. It recognizes that the single voice may offer powerful views, and that the group's effort to understand minority as well as majority views can result in its most creative outcomes. When groups and communities attempt to make decisions that work for everybody, the results are often more original and humane. It is in the process of attempting to include and recognize all voices that consensus-building puts values into practice. It transcends itself as a decision-making method to become a building block whose values and related practices are essential to the agency milieu.

First, building consensus places an equal value on the voices of all members. An equal value is placed on the right, responsibility, and value of each voice to be heard, without judging its merit. Inviting and celebrating differences, which is at the core of diversity, requires a consistent and reliable respect for all views. The value of inclusion is *a priori*. Middleman and Wood suggest:

> A concomitant skill to reaching for consensus is reaching for difference. . . . In fact, consensus is meaningless if differences are forced underground in the interest of peacefulness. A satisfying resolution to differences, whether through consensus or voting, is all the more possible if differences are aired before a direction is taken. . . . To reach for difference is to help the group participants see things from various angles, reviewing alternative points. If only positives are expressed, the social worker should elicit the opposite viewpoint. If only negative valuations are entertained, then the worker seeks expression of other possibilities. The worker helps the group see and think beyond dichotomies: right/wrong, yes/no, good/bad. (Middleman and Wood, 1990, p. 133-34)

The process of building consensus insists upon the value of participation. It requires that all participants work together to reach a conclusion and be responsible for shaping and influencing the outcome of decisions and actions within the group. They are also responsible for ensuring that all voices are heard, and that inclusion is practiced. Ultimately, this process helps all participants feel that they have a voice and a sense of ownership in the agency and the community.

Clearly, all views will not be recognized; all needs will not be met. I am not suggesting that there be no centralized authority or that either the staff group, the client group, or both together make every decision in the agency. But all participants need to feel a stake in what happens and should feel free to voice their views.

> Decision-making in a group may take place through consensus or through a voting procedure depending on size, intimacy of members, and time available. Whether the purpose of the group is problem-solving for individual members, or a social situation, it appears to be essential for direction from leadership to facilitate the process and to channel the flow of ideas and feelings (Hartford, 1971, p. 243).

In American society, majority rule is the most common method for making group decisions. Therefore, staff and children alike will need practice and encouragement to develop and use consensus-building skills and, in particular, to learn to reach for and treasure differences. The worker should emphasize that building consensus helps to sustain an agency culture that is fair and safe for all members.

The final four principles also operate to sustain the health of the organization. They provide checks and balances to guard against the conformity and myopic vision that so often characterizes a closely-knit community.

6. Seeing

Seeing constitutes the institutional capacity and norms that encourage agency members to recognize the realities and conditions of both the organization and its individual members. “Seeing” is a crucial principle of the Model of Common Humanity for two reasons. It values each member of the organization by asserting that he or she should be “seen” in the context of the realities in his or her life. Secondly, it requires staff and other organizational caretakers to actively reflect on the basic integrity and health of the agency culture. The continuing health of the milieu will depend upon their willingness and skill in accomplishing this.

When problems are ignored, and nobody dares to acknowledge or identify them, they become like elephants in the living room. In a family, for example, the elephant in the living room may be Dad’s drinking problem. It’s as if there’s an elephant which everybody pretends is not there. By denying such a basic reality, participants sacrifice more and more of their souls, and the integrity of the institution—whether family or agency—is corroded.

Each of us may be susceptible to an incapacity to see particular problems, problems that evoke in us a personal pain or emotion. Because it feels intolerable, or makes us feel helpless or overwhelmed, we look away. Like families, agencies are subject to their own elephants in the room. Problems become elephants when staff or agency members refuse to acknowledge them, so eventually a taboo develops against speaking out. Agencies are particularly vulnerable to elephants that represent wider social problems.

> At a non-profit agency in which I worked, a two-tiered office system demarcated the professional and managerial offices from the front-line non-professional workers. The professionals held all the outside, windowed offices that formed a square on the perimeter of the building. All the front-line workers sat in the center of the square. One day, I observed aloud to a colleague that all the out-

> side offices were occupied by white people, while the inside desks were occupied almost entirely by people of color. 'I never noticed that,' she exclaimed. 'I don't ever notice what race people are.'

Seeing, in the social service field, is not a matter of possessing an intuitive gift. It is a moral imperative. It requires objectivity, self-reflection, skill, and courage. It can be difficult for youth practitioners and administrators: admitting our own blind spots and fears is especially painful to those of us who have dedicated our careers to the field of youth development.

> In the course of providing technical assistance, I once asked a group of experienced youth practitioners, working in an area with high rates of poverty, violence and school failure, if any of them had ever worked with a child who was suicidal. Of the dozen or so people in the room, not a single person said that he or she had ever worked with a suicidal or seriously depressed child. We moved on with the workshop, which consisted of alerting people to signs of depression and suicide. The following week, when the group returned, several members recounted the past week's events. Several had followed up on youngsters whom they thought might be depressed. One person reached out to a child who had sat in the corner of the room for most of the year. Another staffer shared that she realized her daughter was seriously depressed and that she had arranged for an immediate psychiatric assessment.

Seeing requires organizational support. "Why should we ask kids if they're feeling depressed or suicidal," asked one worker, "if we don't have a hospital or mental health clinic in our neighborhood?" In the best of all worlds, a responsive agency sends the message to staff that it will support the principle of "seeing." The supportive agency must encourage the "seeing" by supporting any attendant helplessness and frustration that the staff may feel and by being prepared to respond concretely to the findings. Thus, seeing is a core value of the agency culture that, when put into action, has an impact on the programs and activities that are offered to clients, as well as the nature of discourse engaged in by members of the community.

Finally, seeing can be difficult and painful. As an administrator, I have realized that I don't always practice the values that I preach. The old axiom, "physician heal thyself," is poignantly applicable. This potential problem can be largely avoided by adhering to the next principle, reciprocal impact, which suggests that the lively interplay between practice and policy (practitioners and administrators) can provide a valid test of the effectiveness and relevance of both programs and policies.

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7. Reciprocal Impact

The continuing health of the agency culture depends, in part, upon the reciprocal impact of practice and policy. The delivery of services should both shape and reflect the policies, rules, regulations, and practices of the organization. This critical interplay of feedback and ideas is most effective when it is clearly understood by both front-line staff and administration. Clearly, front-line staff count on formal agency policies and guidelines to make decisions and deliver services. Conversely, based on their daily experiences working with children and families, staff should inform and refine organizational policy when warranted. Administrators should emphasize to staff that recognizing discrepancies between policy and practice is key to the continued health of the agency culture. Any "disconnect" between policy and practice alert staff to potentially problematic or obsolete policy and related practice, thus providing a useful opportunity to re-examine these areas.

Middleman, in describing the skill "Turning Issues Back to the Group," states that "A major objective of the social worker in working with groups is to help the participants take as much responsibility for their group life as possible. This imperative pilots the work regardless of group type" (e.g., committee, treatment, skill development) (1990, p. 130).

Similarly, staff should be encouraged to assume responsibility for the agency culture as well as its specific practices and policies.

When staff successfully exercise their power to make an impact on agency policy, they assume increasing levels of ownership of the program itself. Cohesion increases, as does a sense of loyalty and pride in the community. Ironically, however, a highly cohesive staff and closely knit community face the potential hazard of losing their dynamism and fluidity. The next principle suggests that maintaining a dual focus on the needs of individual group members and the group as a whole provides a safeguard against rigidity.

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8. Focus

Over time, highly cohesive cultures can become rigid and conformist. Entrenched communities lose their elasticity as change increasingly becomes anathema. Group workers recognize that the more cohesive a group, the less fluid are its boundaries, and the less likely it is to entertain new ideas (Northern, 1988). Middleman talks about "group think," "a tendency of group participants to strive for cohesiveness and concurrence with group pressure toward conformity or efficiency." "Group think," she writes, "obscures the richness of diverse thinking" (1990 p. 34)

The principle of focus proposes that the agency culture should work to maintain fluidity by focusing on both the individual and the group as a whole. As a staffer once explained to me, we all play different instruments in the orchestra. But we are all playing the same music. This principle is especially relevant when new employees join a closely-knit community. In such a community, newcomers may struggle to maintain their individuality while trying to fit into the group. While veteran staff help newcomers to adapt to the agency setting, an overriding respect toward individuality must be maintained. The newcomer's fresh perceptions of the group may unearth new insights. He or she should be encouraged to find his or her way in the group, to examine what the group offers, expects, believes in, and pursues. Northern writes:

> In social work practice, the task for the worker is to influence the development of norms that further the purpose of the group. One such crucial norm to which it is hoped members will conform is that of acceptance of differences. If members conform to that norm, then the group becomes a means to helping a person to find his own identity through a combination of support and stimulation toward change. (1988, p. 37)

The principle of focus is perhaps the most difficult to achieve simply because groups are inclined to protect themselves from the hazards and anxiety associated with change. "Focus" requires community members to foster an agency culture that values differences—including differences that may threaten the status quo. The focus then is twofold: maintaining the culture while welcoming the insights and view of newcomers.

9. Dynamism

The final principle is pervasive. It is both exhausting and exhilarating. It holds out the notion that values are dynamic, and that community members are expected to keep them alive throughout the day. As with artwork or music, values should not be set aside, securely wrapped, in deep storage. They should fill our agency lives, provoke discussion, challenge thinking, and encourage questions. When a staff person states a community value, it should not signal the end of the discussion. Rather, it should provoke a discussion, whenever logistically possible. Thus, a paradox of sorts exists: The worker is expected to assert the values of the community while encouraging community members to vigorously examine and challenge those values. Encouraging an examination of values is distinctly different from encouraging youth to disregard values, which should never occur.

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The worker can use a variety of skills to ensure that values sustain their dynamism at the agency. Michelle Simon, a youth worker, explains:

> Kids sometimes interpret rules too rigidly. If you say no dissing, they think you mean that they have to be best friends with everybody. Teaching the nuance of the rules and how to cope with rules is critical. We forget sometimes that kids need help understanding what the rule really means and how it applies to different situations.

A unified team creates a culture of trust when it embraces a body of core values, vision, and expectations and predictably responds to children's behavior and struggles. Before team members can offer trust to clients, they have to build it between and among themselves by wrestling with the values, visions, and expectations of the organization. The nine principles of the Model for Common Humanity support this assertion by asking community members to engage in dynamic, thoughtful exchanges about every aspect of our agency culture.

Conclusion

The aim of this model is to create a culture that enables people and organizations to flourish. The interplay of the nine elements helps to sustain the health of the milieu while guiding members' adaptation. A sine qua non of participation is empowerment. Participants learn a variety of new skills such as building consensus, leadership, self-expression, and offering and receiving help. Youngsters also internalize a host of positive values; they are empowered to take responsibility for themselves, for others, for the group and the community at large; they realize their own and others' dignity; they take healthy risks, and they learn to embrace a benevolent view of struggle, personal growth, and change. Some youngsters learn to trust themselves and others.

The model does not provide a template for agency use. Its design does, however, encourage the emergence of distinct cultural, racial and other identities. As a result of their own culture-building efforts, each community will develop a distinct, common language that facilitates communication and understanding. Use of the principles will help communities to define work that is organic to the members of the community, the staff, and the general purposes of the organization.

Building a community is an ongoing process. While benchmarks can and will be reached, there is never a day when the work stops. As the nine principles indicate, even when a community achieves a level of safety and healthy exchange, it faces potential problems of rigidity and conformity. By definition, the work can never end.

The agency culture is a dynamic organism. Initially, the vision rests entirely with the workers who shoulder the burden of believing in a vision and sharing it with others. There is a point, however, when the agency develops a life of its own. At this point, community members share the new responsibility of sustaining this culture.

Creating a culture takes time. This past summer, for example, at a new camp funded in part to achieve educational goals, marked tension arose between the community-building and teaching priorities. It is important to realize that building a culture and enlisting children and families in that culture takes time. Consensus-building takes much longer than a quick vote. Discussing purpose requires more time than a cursory camp registration slip. As one staffer said, "Children are learning; it's just a different kind of learning." But I believe that educational learning works best when children feel a vital connection to leaders and teachers and to each other.

The Model of Common Humanity asks that all members of the community work to achieve the common good of the community. For some people, taking that first step is an act of great courage. It is a step towards assuming personal power and taking responsibility for one's life and for the culture that we all share. To help our youth to achieve this remarkable goal, those of us who work with youth must walk the same path. And by raising the expectations to which we will hold our own organizations, we can truly effect wide and meaningful change.

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