Challenge Your Thinking about Human Services Change: Transform by Turning Barriers into Strengths

Video Transcript

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I believe when you look at yourself or you look at other folks in your life, that often our strengths and our weaknesses come from the same root. Okay? So when you think about some of the things you’re proudest of and then maybe some of the things that concern you, they aren’t like opposites. They are kind of the good and bad side of something.

Flip the Coin
And I think the same thing goes for organizations. And I think what I’ve come to understand being part of a bigger and harder to move organization, is that when you come to a challenge, you can think of kind of trying to make that challenge go away or you can kind of think of it as being two sides of a coin and your job is to flip that coin. Your job is to figure out how that barrier can become a strength and let me just give you – metaphors are nice, but I’m a pretty down to earth person. Let me give you a very particular example.

So my focus at ACF is on cross-cutting initiatives. And one of the key things is trying to get us to integrate across programs and there are lot of really outstanding performance oriented directors of programs. They want nothing to do with us, right. And you could say they’re siloed, you could say they’re territorial, all those things or you could say they’re very mission driven and performance oriented and they know what they want to get done and they’re trying to get it done.
And when I started having these conversations, I think I resonated more with that first thing, like all these territory – they just don’t understand that we got to have a family centered focus. We got to think about all the things these families need. Why are they being so narrow? You know, why can’t they understand that their program is just a little piece of the puzzle?

And what I came to understand by listening, by valuing the strength that they bring to their individual program is trying to figure out what they’re trying to accomplish and how that can be one really important part of the foundation and how I can offer the coordination and the connection as kind of an umbrella or as protection, as a web that will help them do what they want to do.

And I think, again, it’s a flipping, as opposed to pushing back against that silo. It’s like what’s the strength there? What’s the underlying positive there that I can praise and encourage and also try to transform a little bit?

I have one quote on my office and it’s actually from Martha Johnson who was the head of the GSA. Transparency is impossible when fear of failure guarantees that the conversation is only about success. And I just see that over and over again. We talk about transparency. We talk about the need to kind of talk across. We talk about the need to perform. When we don’t make room to talk about what isn’t working, when we don’t allow for failure, when we don’t recognize that innovation and experimentation, it wouldn’t be an experiment if we knew it was going to work, right? We would just do it. We’re experimenting ‘cause we aren’t sure. So creating a context.

And just last thing, building on what Ted said, demonstrating that. The most powerful thing to do is to admit that you were wrong as a leader to say, you know, you’re right, you told me this wouldn’t work for this reason and you were right. And here’s why I wanted to do it anyway, but now I see that you’re right and how are we going to fix it? So making it safe because if it’s not safe to fail, then you just cannot innovate.