Executive Summary

At a Human Services Tipping Point: How Leaders Move from Ideas to Outcomes

The 2015 Human Services Summit: Emergent Leadership – Turning Ideas into Outcomes

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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A good idea alone only goes so far. Yet it can change everything when implemented well. Executing good ideas to improve capacity and outcomes is difficult in today's human services environment. Success demands adaptive leadership at every level of the organization.

The Imperative for Change

There will always be barriers to progress in human services—from legacy technologies and organizational silos to legislative change and resource strain. Despite these realities, human services agencies have more tools and deeper knowledge to move past them than ever before.

Think of how brain science, digital technologies, evidence-based service, creative funding strategies and other exciting breakthroughs can change human services delivery.

With such innovations within reach, the challenge is not always what to do—but how to do it. A common struggle for agencies is to operationalize what they know and bring staff and stakeholders along. This is what it takes to grow their capacity and move up the Human Services Value Curve.

This movement from ideas to outcomes was at the heart of the discussion at The 2015 Human Services Summit: Emergent Leadership – Turning Ideas into Outcomes at Harvard University. Convened by Leadership for a Networked World and the Technology and Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard, in collaboration with Accenture, for the sixth year this summit brought together human services practitioners to share what works and learn from each other. These leaders’ in-the-trenches experiences and insights from Harvard faculty and researchers reveal a common thread.

Human services agencies are at tipping point. Exciting possibilities await them, but realizing new production frontiers involves risk and uncertainty. Making progress means abandoning the comfort of the status quo. Along the way, agencies find themselves challenging structure, culture, processes, policy, and even executive sponsorship. As energizing as this can be, it can be overwhelming too.

Summit conversation shows that adaptive leadership is a critical difference-maker for human services agencies to execute new ideas well. This executive summary tells some of the stories of human service leaders who are exercising adaptive leadership. It explores the bold actions that make adaptive leadership so essential in human services today and distills lessons learned from those who convened at Harvard this October.

“Our job as leaders is to move the needle as far as we can in our time, in our position, and in our jobs. We must hardwire into our cultures, our organizations and into our people... And people are going to pick up that mantle and keep running it forward.”

Susan Dreyfus
President & CEO
Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
The Human Services Value Curve: A Tool To Track Progress

Human services practitioners created the Human Services Value Curve to help agencies guide the evolution of service delivery. This practical framework tracks human services business model development across four levels. The higher the level, the greater an agency’s capacity to deliver outcomes.

- **Regulative Business Model.** This model is the starting point for all human services organizations. It is a basic model to deliver services to eligible people in compliance with policy and program regulations.
- **Collaborative Business Model.** This model delivers the best mix of services that people are eligible to receive. It breaks through boundaries so agencies can collaborate and share information.
- **Integrative Business Model.** This model seamlessly coordinates and integrates services so that agencies can effectively identify and address root causes of people’s needs for effective solutions.
- **Generative Business Model.** This is an innovative, future-focused model of human services delivery. Leadership, operations, technologies and processes are adaptive and innovation is continuous.

“The Human Services Value Curve has been that ideal framework that has allowed us to engage in a dialogue with the individuals who consume our services, who fund our services as taxpayers, and who also hold us accountable.”

Kelly Harder
Director, Community Services
Dakota County, MN
A Different Kind of Leadership

Ronald Heifetz—Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School—coined and developed the theory and framework of adaptive leadership.

At the Summit, he explained that human services leaders—all leaders—face technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges can be solved in relatively short order with specific tools such as technology, policy or process changes.

Adaptive challenges are more complex and deeply rooted because they involve capacity building. Not only do they require entire organizations to venture into the unknown, the journey itself can be highly disruptive, cutting into people’s long-held value systems.

These challenges require adaptive leadership. This is not about a single authority at the top of the organization making rapid-fire decisions.

Adaptive leadership is leadership at all levels that fosters learning and experimentation over time amid organizational and cultural resistance, and often, the threat of failure.

Adaptive Leadership in Action

Consider these five fundamentals of adaptive leadership in human services:

1. Honor the positive and build from strength

“We must help people to understand that it’s not that they are no longer needed, but that they already demonstrated the ability to do great things...How do we use your ability to do great things to influence the direction that we need to go in tomorrow?”

Raquel Hatter
Commissioner
Tennessee Department of Human Services

Leaders in challenging environments often lead with a knee-jerk reaction that making progress demands a clean slate. Adaptive leaders think differently. They acknowledge what works in their organization, and move forward from there. Heifetz reminds us that this is how evolution works. Transformative change in nature is highly conservative, and leans much more toward preservation than complete revision.

Building from strength takes the discipline to embrace slower change than most human services leaders might be inclined to undertake. There is as sense of urgency about their challenges for one, and they want to show results during their tenure. But adaptive leaders have to move slowly to move fast.

For Raquel Hatter, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Human Services, this principle applies to moving up the Human Services Value Curve. With the generative model as the ultimate goal, it is easy for leaders to lose sight of the innate value of the other models. Hatter views the regulative state as a necessary foundation, not a lesser pass-through. If organizations get it wrong, they jeopardize everything else.

2. Harness staff power for leadership from within

“We have a consistent loop on talking directly, chatting with the director, chatting with the deputy director. We try to be intentional about that immediate feedback as opposed to getting the information and then never responding.”

Virginia Pryor
Deputy Director of Child Welfare
Georgia Division of Family and Children Services

Adaptive leaders excel at the art of bringing differences together within and outside of their organizations. Heifetz explains that they do not have to be the authoritarian figure with all the right answers. They actively solicit new perspectives, celebrating leadership at every level.

Summit attendees echoed the importance of listening to, empowering and even anointing staff as leaders. Tennessee’s Hatter sees her role as giving others who clearly have the passion and commitment the “permission” that they need to act. “We’re not going to be an organization that’s oppressed and marginalized trying to lead people who are oppressed and marginalized.”

She is thinking about generative capacity while refining regulative processes—building one type of strength from another. She is exploring how regulative indicators can have a generative effect. Take the example of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. “If we’re not timely, how many kids and families are waiting? It’s not the time that is measured, it’s a hungry measure.” As an adaptive leader, Hatter recognizes that making progress sometimes means reframing rather than dismantling the current state.
In Michigan, where Timothy Becker, Chief Deputy Director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, is spearheading the integration of two departments overseeing 140 health and human services programs, staff are involved in planning. What’s more, leadership is acting with intention to create a culture where staff members are encouraged to take chances in the service of better ways of working and serving.

In another example, at the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, workforce development is a significant part of ongoing transformation. This involves mentoring for supervisors, improved compensation, career path development and other initiatives. The agency is conducting staff surveys and road shows for leadership to connect with frontline staff. There is clear recognition that agency personnel are more likely to embrace change—big or small—if they feel like they are a part of it and can lead it too.

3 See the silver lining in unexpected places

“When you come to a challenge, you can think of trying to make that challenge go away or you can 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.”

Maria Cancian
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Adaptive leaders need to be optimists in mindset and action to seize on the potential of a good idea. This is especially true in human services where high-emotion problems can be daunting, and failures sometimes get more attention than victories do.

In his Summit presentation, Dr. Joseph Parks, Director of Missouri HealthNet, offered a fresh perspective on developing stronger cross-boundary partnerships. This insight reflects Parks’ experience helping to create the groundbreaking Missouri Health Homes initiative. This unique service delivery program is designed to improve care for a targeted population with mental illness or substance abuse and at least one chronic condition. Rooted in behavioral health approaches, it uses care coordination and disease management powered by data analytics to improve outcomes and reduce costs.

Developing this model required significant structural changes—recreating relationships among multiple agencies, vendors, legislators and the private sector. As Parks explains, a shared, data-backed view helped to build relationships around facts, not assumptions. “We show all the data transparently. Everybody gets to see where they are on the benchmark reports compared to everybody else, all the different providers.” Partnerships are often critical to unwinding adaptive challenges. As Parks reminds us, data transparency trades guesswork for a foundation of trust and mutual accountability.

4 Strengthen partnerships with data

“We found that looking at data improves relationships as opposed to telling each other anecdotes, because everything becomes a tussle hypothesis.”

Dr. Joseph Parks
Director
Missouri HealthNet

Partnerships are often critical to unwinding adaptive challenges. As Parks reminds us, data transparency trades guesswork for a foundation of trust and mutual accountability.

5 Experiment, experiment, experiment

“What we’re going to emphasize continually with our staff from the management ranks, all the way down to the staff level, it’s okay to take chances and we’re going to stand behind you. We’ve got your back if a mistake happens. That’s okay, we learn from it, we carry on and you’ve got to do that, otherwise you’re standing still.”

Timothy Becker
Chief Deputy Director
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
When agencies face adaptive challenges, there is no proven solution. Leaders in situations without a roadmap must be bolder, embracing experimentation. As ACF’s Cancian says, “If it’s not safe to fail, then you cannot innovate.”

This adaptive spirit of pioneering uncharted territory is critical to more generative ways of working. Consider the story of Four Oaks, a private organization offering child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health services to youth in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Anne Gruenewald, President and CEO, recalled the details at the Summit. Eight years ago, the Four Oaks Board and staff leadership reviewed results and determined that they could not definitively prove that they were achieving their mission of assuring that children become successful adults. This spurred the organization to begin a journey of significant business model changes to adopt a TotalChild approach to address all of the challenges that children face in every domain of their lives.

Not surprisingly, working toward this goal demanded that the organization stretch. “The Four Oaks Board approved this business plan…with the idea that we would first have to prove it to ourselves that it works. We couldn’t go out and sell it and ask others to invest in this if we couldn’t demonstrate that it works,” recalls Gruenewald. Without this will to try, Four Oaks’ success in aligning partners to expand services to include housing resources and neighborhood revitalization would never have been possible.

“Focusing on People First

“It's how do we have that person come in, have their needs met by saying here's what I need, here's my problems and then have the system work to bring those services to that individual rather than have the individual have to work the system so hard to get what they need.”

Dr. Susan Mosier
Secretary and State Health Officer
Kansas Department of Health and Environment

In human services, adaptive leaders are essential to navigate the highs and lows of moving from ideas to outcomes. In addition to the five fundamentals explored in this executive summary, these leaders share a non-negotiable trait. They have a passion for the people they serve—and they never lose sight of it.

Those who shared their experiences at the Summit have empathy for the struggles families endure, and they are emphatic that people get the help they need. Georgia’s Virginia Pryor says it best, “The only way to change the lives of families and systems is to be inside them. You have to be in there day in and day out, have to be up to the challenge to do it.” This is inspired leadership. This is adaptive human services leadership.
About the Summit

Developed by Leadership for a Networked World

Convened by the Technology and Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard

In collaboration with accenture

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