



Observations of Leaders Driving Changes in State Government

Leadership Tools and Lessons from Two Work Support Strategies States

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Implementing change in state government, as in other large public and private organizations, is an uphill battle. But productive change is feasible. In this brief, we examine how government officials in Colorado and Illinois, two states participating in the Work Support Strategies project (see box 1), seized opportunities, overcame obstacles, and led change.

Both career civil servants within government and constituents outside government agree that, although state government administrations frequently promise change, they often are unable to deliver fully or, if they do make changes, subsequent administrations quickly reverse those reforms. Multiple external pressures—from stakeholders, the federal government, the courts, the state legislature, and others—can create countervailing demands that either stymie change or create many contradictory and inconsistent changes so that there is no clear overall direction. The challenges for those seeking change are many. Frequent turnover at the highest levels of state government along with complex and entrenched bureaucracies, limited funding for social and health services, and lengthy processes for changing laws and regulations can frustrate efforts to improve services and service delivery for working families. Nonetheless, strong leaders can strategically seize on external pressures as opportunities to overcome challenges and move their states in new directions.

In this brief, we review the contexts and challenges specific to Colorado and Illinois. Though similar in some ways to leadership in other large organizations, leadership in state government takes place in a particular context, with its own constraints, challenges, and opportunities. We draw on the insights of state leaders as well as the perceptions of their colleagues, partners, and stakeholders to paint a picture of the leaders' actions. We do not evaluate the actions of these leaders in Colorado and Illinois but rather use their experiences as concrete examples of state government challenges and responses to

them. Drawing on these examples, we identify key lessons and strategic tools that other state government officials could apply when facing similar challenges to effective leadership of major public programs, particularly in health and human services.

BOX 1

Work Support Strategies

Work Support Strategies (WSS) is a multiyear, multi-state initiative to help low-income families get and keep the package of work supports for which they are eligible. WSS has been working directly with Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina since 2011. Through grants and expert technical assistance, the initiative help states reform and align the systems delivering work support programs intended to increase families' well-being and stability—particularly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Through WSS, states seek to streamline and integrate service delivery, use twenty-first century technology, and apply innovative business processes to improve administrative efficiency and reduce burden on states and working families.

We conducted more than a dozen interviews in Colorado and Illinois with agency leaders and workers at multiple levels of government, as well as community stakeholders in both states. Additionally, we drew on information gathered previously throughout the evaluation of the states' WSS efforts. We asked those interviewed to discuss leadership broadly, the particular leadership in social services in their states, and the role that leadership did or did not play in addressing specific challenges the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) face. We sought to synthesize the lessons about how state leaders used these specific challenges as opportunities for change and we identified potential insights and lessons relevant to state government leadership more broadly. Across the interviews we conducted with state government employees and partners, multiple themes emerged.

We found three key themes for seizing opportunities to lead positive, strategic change: (1) creating a clear shared vision and showing passion for the mission, (2) building trusting reciprocal relationships inside and outside government, and (3) creating mutual accountability for shared, objective, and measurable goals.

Six tools, in turn, helped leaders in Colorado and Illinois bring to fruition these key themes for leading change: (1) framing the mission, (2) communicating creatively and effectively, (3) building inclusive teams of stakeholders, (4) creating an atmosphere of transparency and honesty, (5) showing results and taking risks, and (6) establishing mutual ownership of problems and solutions amongst stakeholders through objective measurement of progress. Although these key themes and tools did not

guarantee success in changing state government in Colorado and Illinois, they appeared crucial in building an environment in which change could be accomplished.

Finally, we discuss the personal characteristics of the leaders. There did not appear to be any one type of successful leader. Rather, the leaders shared some characteristics but drew from different backgrounds to lead.

State Government Context

Making meaningful and lasting change in a state government is challenging. New governors and cabinet secretaries routinely seek change, and career civil servants may attempt to make changes within their spheres of influence, yet many observe that things in government never really seem to change. One respondent, for instance, discussed how Colorado state officials had for years promised to change an application for benefits, without success. Another respondent spoke about the historical context of technology improvements in Illinois. It was “important to combat skepticism,” she said. Technology changes, she noted, “always died in process in Illinois. People half believed this would never come to fruition.” Formal studies of change in state government have often reinforced this view, finding incomplete implementation of new practices and institutions (Berman 1995; Moynihan 2006; Mayne 2007; Cohen, Eimicke, and Heikkila 2008). The frequent, built-in turnover of top leaders exacerbates the problem of incomplete change; though turnover promotes accountability and ought to drive change, leaders have little time to try to implement change. Career civil servants, on the other hand, have long memories of prior unsuccessful efforts at reform, which can leave them less motivated to push for change. Meanwhile, state leaders face strong external pressures for change from myriad actors, including Congress, federal executive overseers, stakeholders and state legislatures, which can lead to disjointed and incomplete efforts. In addition, the sheer scale of state governments is enormous, both in terms of the large numbers of staff, clients and stakeholders, and the huge stakes involved in government responsibilities. Further, the complex bureaucracies and procurement rules, in place to support government functions and integrity, can also restrict the ability of even strong leaders to change policies and procedures. For example, efforts to change SNAP policies controlling when in the month families receive their benefits involved complex coordination across multiple government agencies and cooperation with private businesses, such as supermarkets. Finally, limited funding for social services can limit options for change. Reforming social services is rarely free, and finding the funds often involves difficult trade-offs among government priorities.

Two State Stories of Challenge and Opportunity

We asked state officials and nonprofit partners to focus on actual challenges each state had faced to make the lessons about leadership for positive change more concrete. For Colorado, we asked respondents to focus on two challenges: (1) the historic tension and lack of trust between county and state agencies and (2) the court order to improve timeliness for SNAP, Medicaid, and cash assistance in 2010. For Illinois, we asked respondents to focus on the development of Illinois’s Integrated Eligibility

System (IES), an automated system to handle the applications and ongoing case management for SNAP, Medicaid, cash assistance, and other programs.

Colorado's Challenge

Colorado's county-administered structure allows each county to independently choose its approach to delivering work supports to eligible families, some aspects of policy, and levels of funding for administrative costs. This flexibility and autonomy at the county level has led to unique county perspectives, policies, and operations that depend on local economics, politics, leadership, and other relevant county characteristics. The governor and state agencies have limited authority over delivery of work supports.

Historically, county leaders have participated in state-level decisions about program rules and the allocation of funds. However, county inclusion has not been consistent, and state transparency in procedures and policymaking has been lacking at times. Further, state staff presence in local offices and involvement in local operations in the past was limited to audits, case reviews, and various monitoring activities. As a result, the relationship between CDHS and the counties has been seen as more punitive than supportive, thereby creating tension.

Since 2010, Colorado has been under a court order to process SNAP, Medicaid, and cash assistance benefits within the federally mandated time frames. The court suit arose from backlogs and timeliness issues that began when Colorado's integrated eligibility system (the Colorado Benefits Management System) was rolled out in 2004. Flaws in the Colorado Benefits Management System design resulted in a processing backlog and the failure to provide a number of customers with their benefits. Hence, the court ordered that 95 percent of applications for benefit programs within the management system must be processed within the federal deadlines for timeliness. This mandate created significant pressure for the state to work with counties to improve the delivery of social services in Colorado.

The first step leaders took was to reach out to and work with the counties to develop a plan for meeting the timeliness mandate. Multiple levels of management were brought in to examine the needs of the state and the needs of the counties, and all worked together to develop a plan. At the same time, a new data-driven management strategy, called *C-Stat*, was implemented to measure performance across CDHS, including the progress and success of case processing. State and county leaders now meet monthly to openly and transparently assess progress, further increasing trust. Colorado was able to meet the mandate and has greatly improved its relationship with counties. Leadership at all levels is dedicated to continuing to work on a strong partnership between the state and the counties. We discuss the tools that Colorado used to meet this mandate and improve the relationship with the counties further in the following sections.

Illinois's Challenge

Illinois also encountered external pressure disrupting the status quo. Like many states, Illinois faced increased caseload and eligibility system upgrades tied to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA,

enacted in 2010, promised to greatly increase enrollment in health insurance, including Medicaid, and offered states increased federal Medicaid funding. Following the passage of the ACA, Medicaid experts in Illinois quickly identified a significant problem: the state's existing eligibility system, developed in the 1970s, could not manage the projected increased caseload, new rules and requirements, and database needs brought on by Medicaid expansion. As one respondent explained, "I said there is no way you are going to enroll as many people as the ACA is going to bring you unless you put in a new eligibility system; the old system can't meet this challenge." Illinois seized the opportunity the availability of funds offered for new technology under ACA and quickly developed a plan to create a new system—the Integrated Eligibility System (IES)—which would allow online applications and case management for SNAP, Medicaid, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program.

Although the ACA provided the majority of funding for creating IES, designing and launching a new system was still a massive challenge. The secretary of the Illinois DHS identified five major challenges: (1) funding, in terms of making sure that ACA matching funds could be used for the system, given competing development deadlines from the state, the US Department of Agriculture, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; (2) partnership, in terms of bringing together stakeholders inside and outside government; (3) design, to make sure that a functional system was created; (4) communication, to explain the new system to both case workers and clients; and (5) motivation, to create buy-in among agency staff for the new system.

The Integrated Eligibility System is still a work in progress. The first phase was launched on October 1, 2013. Technological glitches marred the launch and Illinois has spent months working them out. The client-facing application portal has earned high marks from advocates, and improvements are continuing on the caseworker-facing portal. The second phase of IES has been pushed back to 2015 to allow for more planning on the transfer of data between the previous (legacy) system and IES, and progress is ongoing. Overall, the people we interviewed characterized IES as mostly a success, with great strides having been made.

Application to Other States

The challenges Colorado and Illinois encountered—facing external pressures from federal government agencies and courts, developing new technologies, managing relationships between state and local agencies—are common across the six WSS states and beyond. Other states have been improving or adapting their technological systems to meet ACA mandates. And all states face difficulties in effectively and efficiently delivering social services to citizens.

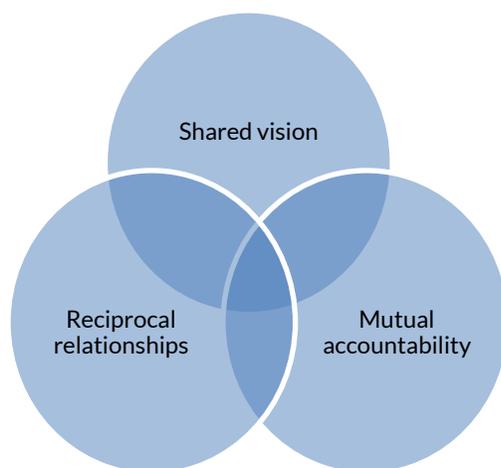
Using these specific challenges to focus the discussions, we asked respondents in Colorado and Illinois about the actions and characteristics of their social service leaders. In each state, we focused on two leaders, one a political appointee at the cabinet secretary level and the other a top-level operational leader.¹ We also asked respondents to think about leadership in state government more broadly and to share examples of both successful and unsuccessful leadership.

Three Keys for Leading Positive Change: Shared Vision, Reciprocal Relationships, and Mutual Accountability

The three key themes for leading strategic, positive change in state government are deeply intertwined; vision cannot be separated from relationships, nor can relationships be separated from accountability. Further, these themes are not new; vision, relationships, and accountability are frequently cited in the leadership literature. However, here we see how state leaders in Colorado and Illinois employed these themes to address real-life challenges. Their examples prove instructive in translating these themes from rhetoric to action.

FIGURE 1

Three Keys for Leading Positive Change



Creating a Clear Shared Vision and Showing Passion for the Mission

Passion for the work of social services is key to leadership for two reasons: to motivate the leader personally and to inspire others. As one respondent said, “It’s important that people come to these positions with passion for the work—deep passion and meaningfulness. If you don’t have that, it’s hard to sustain yourself. If you are in it for promotion or glory you will be disappointed.” Another, commenting specifically on Colorado’s leadership, said the leaders had a similar “vision and mission in terms of helping the disadvantaged—not just a job but a passion.” The Illinois DHS Secretary was described as “a true believer. She’s extremely passionate about what we do and the staff under her and the people we serve.”

In Colorado and Illinois, observers reported that this passion also drove the creation of a clear vision and mission that in turn helped to engage others in the work. In what our respondents identified as effective social services leadership, this vision centered on helping people. The Illinois DHS secretary

identified the vision as “serving people in an integrated compassionate matter,” whereas Colorado’s DHS executive director formulated the vision as “reducing hunger” and “helping people get their lives in order.” This straightforward focus on commitment to clients and the well-being of children and families was readily communicated to the staff and clients. It both helped motivate staff to improve services and brought increased stakeholder confidence that change would occur. Partners from outside government spoke positively of these states’ commitment to helping people and described how this commitment encouraged the participation of stakeholders in implementing change; as one partner said, DHS has “taken a herculean task and done a very good job of it.”

Building Trusting Reciprocal Relationships

Building trusting reciprocal relationships was another key to leading change in Colorado and Illinois. Change in state government cannot be accomplished by fiat; to work with counties and meet the court order in Colorado and to create and launch IES in Illinois, trust had to be built between individuals and between different levels of government. The prior contentious relationship between the state and counties in Colorado had resulted in a lack of trust on both sides. Similarly, in Illinois, to gain cooperation in the design and implementation of IES, trust was needed between central DHS offices, local DHS offices, and community stakeholders. All needed to trust each other to work cooperatively on this massive change of technology that would ultimately help clients.

Several factors helped build these relationships, including openness and transparency on the part of leaders; a strong physical presence, which required leaders to visit county and local offices; an effort to keep promises, no matter how small; good listening skills; an understanding of both policy and practice; an effort to ensure that all stakeholders had a seat at the table from the beginning; and celebration of the initiatives’ successes. Respondents agreed that ultimately these factors improved relationships that, in turn, served the cause of change. For instance, one respondent mentioned how the Illinois secretary effectively advocated for more staffing for DHS, which was crucial in helping manage case flow and train workers in IES. Her success in this area further enhanced her credibility with the local office staff.

Creating Mutual Accountability for Shared, Objective, and Measurable Goals

The third key to leading positive change that emerged from our interviews was creating mutual accountability for shared, objective, and measurable goals. By creating a transparent atmosphere, where leaders, too, were held accountable, senior officials helped create an environment in which it was safe to acknowledge mistakes and to express opposition. As one official said, “The importance of humility and transparency is big, too. Effective leaders have a combination of those. [Effective leaders recognize they] are only as strong as the people around them, and I think people are responsive to that because it’s an inclusive approach.” Speaking particularly of one leader, a community partner said, “She’ll talk about if something is not working. She’s not evasive at all.” When partners trust that failures will be discussed, they put more faith in the system and believe that change is possible. This transparency further allowed leaders to learn from their mistakes and change course when needed.

Accountability measures, goals, budgets, and individual performance plans, observers reported, should be clearly and directly connected to the mission and the leaders' own values and purpose. Multiple types of goals are possible and were established in Colorado and Illinois, including data-driven goals such as the percentage of offices meeting SNAP timeliness requirements as well as smaller goals such as the keeping of meeting schedules. All involved in overcoming the challenges in these states shared in this accountability, from local offices through senior leadership, and progress was measured using transparent metrics publicly available on the CDHS website. As one respondent said, "accountability [is] a two-way street." Leaders and staff are accountable to each other; state leaders and local leaders are accountable to each other.

Six Leadership Tools for Creating Shared Vision, Reciprocal Relationships, and Mutual Accountability

How are these themes for successful leadership actually accomplished? And, more concretely, how do these key themes help states overcome their many challenges? In this section, we examine specific tools that help leaders create a clear vision, build trusting relationships, and establish accountability. We illustrate how leaders in Colorado and Illinois used these tools to manage and confront their challenges. Like the key themes, the tools are intertwined and help us better understand the connections between shared vision, trusting reciprocal relationships, and mutual accountability.

Framing the Mission or Purpose

Framing the mission is about putting the vision for social services into terms that resonate for state and county staff members, frontline workers, clients, and other stakeholders. In Colorado, framing the mission meant reminding people why they entered the field of social services and how the work they do directly benefits families. Change means hard work for staff as they learn new systems and new ways of doing things and as they juggle responsibilities. But this work has a purpose. As one leader said it is essential, especially in the toughest of times, to connect with workers around this shared purpose as, "Most people go into the work because they have some sense of a higher desire to help."

This sense of purpose helps workers, including frontline supervisors and staff members, to own the vision, and this ownership of the vision is necessary for change to succeed, according to those interviewed. It can help move workers from wondering why they need to make changes to excitement and buy-in for new practices. In Illinois, local office administrators helped their workers buy in to IES technology changes by explaining how the new system would make it easier for them help others. One respondent said that initially the staff resisted the change, thinking it sounded too good to be true. With more explanation of the project and vision, however, staff members became energetic and excited. Understanding the mission and purpose for the change "refueled them," and prompted them to promote the changes to their colleagues.

Communicating Creatively and Effectively

Communicating the vision effectively is also an important tool. One Colorado respondent said, “Previous leaders had a wonderful vision and heart but also didn’t know how to translate that to something that got people involved.” Communicating effectively first means tailoring the message to different audiences. In Colorado, one respondent referred to “painting a picture and thinking of things that would motivate people. Paint the picture of why it is important for low-income families...and always [look] for hooks that make sense to people.” In Illinois, group conversations with workers at multiple levels and with nonprofit partners “helped reframe the conversation and allowed other people at the table to frame how they thought of [vision].... [Including other actors] served as a turning point for the group to broaden the conversation we were having about it as opposed to just how can we make this work.” In other words, the conversation about change—in this case IES—should not be just about the nuts and bolts of implementation but also about the purpose behind the implementation and everyone’s ideas and concerns.

Communication needs to be consistent, frequent, and accessible through multiple channels. As one respondent in Illinois explained,

[IES] required gearing up a whole lot of people. Illinois is very big. Our eligibility staff even is 4,000 to 5,000 people. Being able to communicate that and get the word out is important for change management, but also just practically. We needed 100 [workers to test the new system.] To do that you need to communicate (1) here is the mission and vision and (2) even though it might stink, practically, this is what we need from you folks so we end up aligned.

To get out the message, Illinois leadership used weekly and daily conference calls with local offices, video and web chats, Internet message boards, e-mails, and visits to regional and local offices. In Colorado, officials placed greatest emphasis on face-to-face meetings in county social services offices, which they used to demonstrate to county staff their dedication to change; this then led to, as one respondent put it, “word getting out on the street that the director cared enough to go out there.” CDHS also set up pathways through which workers at multiple levels could express their opinions and ideas about plans to change the delivery of social services. “We get their feedback on their goals and interests,” one respondent said. “They have the ability to send an e-mail and comment on a strategic plan, so it all goes into the final plans. It’s not just top down.” Responses to these outreach efforts were extremely positive; in both states, multiple respondents commented on how much they appreciated various state listening efforts.

Creating Inclusive Teams of Stakeholders

This communication, in turn, created the building blocks for effective partnerships. It was particularly important in Colorado and Illinois to listen not only to familiar voices, like close partners and large counties, but also to all stakeholders, and respondents praised leaders in these states for having an inclusive attitude when it came to participation. As one said, “[the leader’s] philosophy is inclusivity, and the counties immediately recognized that and embraced that.” This lesson was in some cases hard won. Respondents in Illinois acknowledged that not all stakeholders were brought to the table at the outset

of the IES design. One respondent said, “We, as a state, missed the boat. For one reason, we allowed [the technology design] to happen at too high of a leadership level and didn’t bring in someone from the ground level who could catch those details.” This error was rectified in further meetings, and groups were created specifically to include a broader array of stakeholders, including representatives from policy and technical systems.

Being inclusive is not always easy, and there may be no single right approach. Cherry-picking seats at the table ensures participation and active engagement, but a broader approach may help to show that leaders are not playing favorites and help them hear dissenting viewpoints. These diverse viewpoints may also give a fuller picture of the need for and effect of planned change at the local level. One respondent remarked that inclusive committees can help with “putting together data with what was happening on the ground.”

Hence, leaders must be strategic in developing teams. Partnerships inside and outside government are crucial for accomplishing change; improving the well-being of children and families cannot be accomplished by governments alone. Both Colorado and Illinois created working groups and teams charged with developing ideas related to their challenges (meeting the court mandate and building IES, respectively). In Colorado, the working groups were explicitly led by county staff. In Illinois, both current and retired workers were brought in for different perspectives. Additionally, both states emphasized the importance of including community stakeholders throughout the process of addressing the challenges at hand. In Illinois, a Social Services Advisory Committee, composed of advocates who work with clients, meets regularly and provides information to the state about the advocates’ work and the clients’ perspectives. Similarly, in Colorado, meetings of the coordinating committee and affiliated workgroups that include state, county, and nongovernmental stakeholders provide opportunities for honest communication.

Overall, the two states approached the issue of stakeholder involvement somewhat differently, reflecting different histories, starting points, challenges, and legal structure. In Colorado, counties are independent entities that do not work for the state. The current Colorado governor is a former county executive who mandated, when he took office, that the state and counties work together. As a result, the state focused on building lasting relationships through equal partnerships with counties. One respondent said, “Whether it was a tiny county or a huge, large county, [the state leaders] treated them all equally the same, and I think that really inspired them and motivated them to perform.” The communication was strong both ways. As one county respondent explained, “Over the past five years, the state has done a good job in increasing communication and involving counties in decision processes. That ‘us versus them’ mistrust has been mitigated from my perspective. I think leadership at the state really increased communication to counties and collaboration with counties.”

Reflecting its different context, Illinois emphasized communication with local offices within the framework of the offices’ overall accountability to state leadership. Illinois’s more top-down approach initially contributed to a sense that not enough stakeholders were included in early meetings, but may have been more effective later in the process. One respondent said that the Illinois leadership effectively communicated “by direct contact with staff and meetings she held with us. She was always

very forthright with what we were doing and where we were going and keeping us abreast of the progress through our coffee chats and through the communication and the workshops that we had.”

Creating an Atmosphere of Transparency and Honesty

Part of building these relationships, of course, is transparency and honesty. Trust comes from an atmosphere in which leaders admit their mistakes and allow themselves to be vulnerable to their partners. In Illinois, transparency meant admitting that frontline workers should have been more involved in initial discussions of IES. In Colorado, leadership reached out to county directors after a communication was sent from the state with the wrong tone: “A communication went out to [county social service] directors at one point that came across as more directive than collaborative.... [Directors in] counties didn’t care for that much. I watched to see if that changed the tide for a bit, and it did for a bit, and [the leader] recognized that and sent something out to clear the waters a bit.”

On a more day-to-day basis, transparency meant empowering all stakeholders to raise any issues they had. As one Colorado leader said, “Giving people permission to tell you what isn’t working [is important]. I have to say that of all the things in terms of ensuring change is embedded...you have to know what is really happening.” Leaders in Colorado and Illinois both received plenty of feedback. In Illinois, one state respondent lauded the support of the Social Services Advisory Committee in saying, “[They have] been incredibly patient with us, knowing that it’s all going in the right direction. They appreciate the challenge we’re facing. So the bottom line has been straightforward communication, a lot of honesty.” In Colorado, meetings of the coordinating committee and affiliated workgroups that include state, county, and nongovernmental stakeholders provided similar opportunities for honest communication. Although this level of inclusion has not always been the case, openness and honesty beget more trust and a better relationship—and ultimately more progress. As one Illinois respondent summarized:

I’ve found it effective to be as transparent as possible. There’s been some tough things where we don’t share details with our team because there’s no value in it, but we don’t hide anything. You talk through your decisionmaking process. You have to know your group because sometimes that won’t work—it’ll either confuse people or cause them to feel nervous about something. They can’t handle knowing there were no good choices. But it’s worked well with our team, to talk through the problem, what are solutions you could think of? At the end of the day it’s a few people who make the decision, but talking through it, you at least get buy-in. If you’re more transparent about the decisionmaking process, people appreciate being given the opportunity to weigh in.

Showing Results and Taking Risks

Such openness does bring risk; it can lead to a sense of vulnerability as a leader and as a government agency. But taking these risks and showing their payoffs constitute another important tool in leading for change. At some point, simply talking about change is not enough. Actual change must be implemented and progress must be concretely demonstrated. Leaders in Colorado and Illinois knew the value of early

wins and went after them, even if doing so meant a chance of an early loss derailing a project. In Colorado, leaders revised an integrated social service application:

We had a paper application that was 36 pages long. The good thing about this application was that it was comprehensive, but because it was 36 pages long, a lot of people wouldn't fill it out; they were intimidated. The state had tried for years to reduce this application. [When] I heard about this, I put a group of people together, and they came back with a recommendation to go from a 36-page application to an 8-page application. And we rolled that out by October of the first year. I was a little disappointed because I wanted to go to an online application, but we did it, and it was another indicator that we were going to be true to our word. It was a short-term win that had a huge impact on reputation.

In Illinois, the DHS secretary got new computers for every caseworker, replacing decades-old computers that hindered work through inefficiency. Thus, both Colorado and Illinois made relatively early changes that had a big impact, not only on delivering services but also on showing stakeholders that change would happen. Both states, too, reinforced these wins through other efforts that posed some risk. Illinois had lost 40 percent of its caseworkers in the previous decade, while also facing a sharp increase in caseload. The DHS secretary fought hard to hire more workers, eventually receiving permission to hire more than a thousand new workers. The need was critical and gaining this victory showed her commitment to improving social services. Similarly, in Colorado, the DHS executive director and his staff celebrated every county success through frequent, open communication with county offices, visiting local staff and celebrating every win. Achievements and achievers were singled out for recognition through statewide e-mails, newsletters, awards, and other communications, thereby building excitement for success. As one respondent said, it is “very important to recognize the humans who are doing this work that will help sustain this change effort.”

Establishing Mutual Ownership of Problems and Solutions through Objective Measurement of Progress

The last tool for creating vision, relationships, and accountability centers on how state leaders approach challenges and measure progress. Data and accountability are both powerful tools for change and for leadership. Tying goals to explicit, data-driven measures is part of transparent governing, while holding everyone accountable for progress in these measures helps increase buy-in and trust and ensure progress is being made. Colorado, in particular, relied heavily on data for accountability and ownership. C-Stat was a game changer in leadership there. One respondent summarized the experience with C-Stat:

We created a performance management system we call *C-Stat*, which looks at our outcomes across our entire department in as close to real time as possible, and we manage to those measures. Looking at those outcomes across the state, we set measures we can all see that we are all working toward. We're all working toward that same outcome. We could say, geez, there's 40 percent improvement in that county compared to that county. We would not point blame, but [ask] what can we learn? How can we connect [these two counties so they can] learn from one another?

This emphasis changed how work was conducted in the state. As one respondent said,

There's no way to argue when you see that county X's performance is slipping 10 percent a month for three months, and [the executive director] or his staff follow up. And it's a different conversation, because it's hard data. The conversation is on a different field when you're looking at data.

C-Stat also helped reveal other challenges for Colorado, as officials noticed declining accuracy rates as timeliness improved. Colorado leaders openly acknowledged what the data revealed and began addressing the challenge in part through increased attention to data on program accuracy.

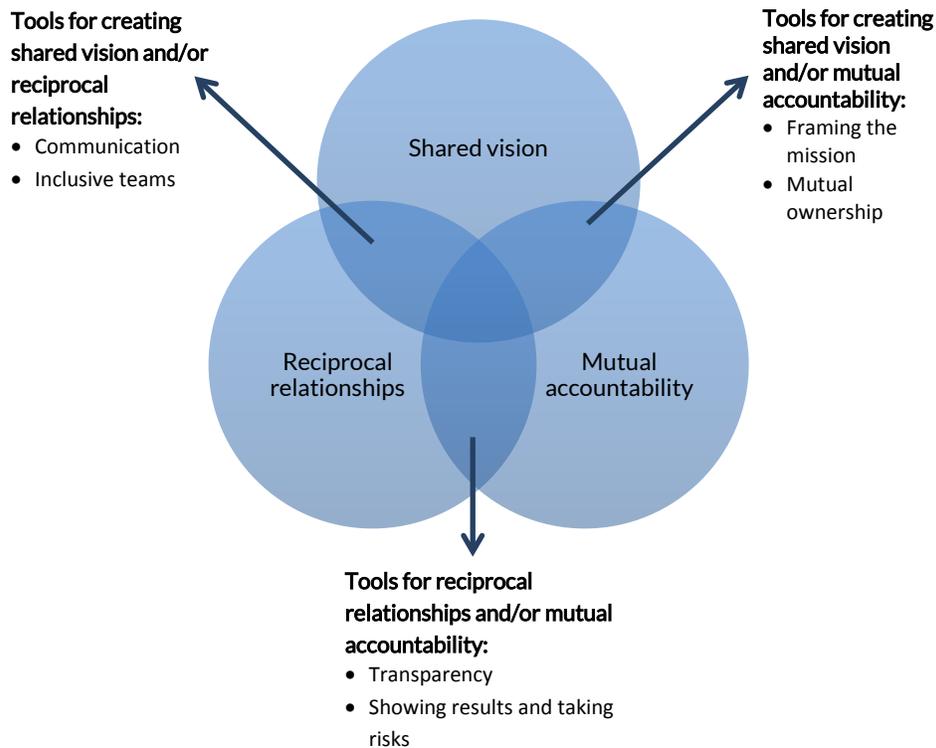
Importantly, leaders too were held accountable, and that accountability was clear and unbiased. As one Colorado respondent said, "If I am not held accountable, or [I am] allowed to continually explain away unmet goals, others will quickly adopt similar rationalizing behaviors. So holding others—and myself—accountable is critical to making progress." In Illinois, accountability was initially seen as somewhat secondary, with the first priority simply to make progress on IES. But as time passed, the two were seen as linked. Now, in weekly calls held with regions and offices, data on timeliness and other case management outcomes are shared, thereby tying progress explicitly to these markers and holding offices accountable.

Accountability also means helping workers at all levels feel ownership of the change. In Illinois, the constant communication between different levels and different branches of government over IES contributed to this sense of ownership: "There was amazingly effective shared ownership that, I think, contributed to all of the success." Ownership empowers workers to make change while holding them accountable for progress.

Figure 2 shows how the six leadership tools support the three key themes of creating shared vision, reciprocal relationships, and mutual accountability. For example, framing the mission in ways that remind workers how they are helping working families fosters both their shared sense of vision and mutual accountability. Showing results fosters both reciprocal relationships and mutual accountability. Creating inclusive teams of stakeholders can foster both reciprocal relationships and lead to a vision that is more widely shared. Likewise, the figure illustrates that to create mutual accountability leaders can use the tools of framing the mission, creating an atmosphere of transparency, showing results, and establishing mutual ownership through objective measurement of progress.

FIGURE 2

Six Leadership Tools for Creating Shared Vision, Reciprocal Relationships, and Mutual Accountability



Personal Characteristics of Leaders

Using these six tools—framing the mission, communicating creatively and effectively, creating inclusive teams of stakeholders, creating an atmosphere of transparency and honesty, showing results and taking risks, and establishing mutual ownership of problems and solutions through objective measures of progress—the leaders of Colorado and Illinois were able to make great strides in addressing their challenges and to make substantial changes to the delivery of work supports in their states. Of course, effective use of tools is not the only way in which leaders define themselves; personal attributes matter as well. Although the leaders in the two states vary considerably in their backgrounds, personal styles, and even approaches, common characteristics emerged from our conversations with respondents.

Personal Characteristics Consistent across Leaders

Perhaps the most important characteristics respondents noted, were to have humility and a thick skin to cope with the criticism that comes their way. As one respondent said, “Don’t personalize it.” Instead, effective leaders are flexible; they respond to feedback by looking for ways to improve: “You need to be honest about what’s not working and willing and flexible to listen.” In Colorado, state leaders listened and responded to the concerns of counties about how they had been treated in the past; in Illinois, state leaders responded to concerns about IES and changed course when necessary. Thus, flexibility is also an

important leadership quality; leaders must “have clear goals in mind but can be flexible...to deal with different things coming at you.” Leaders need to respond to criticism or challenges openly and head on, and they need to be able to change tactics or approaches when needed to reach the goal. Being a leader, respondents said, is about being present and responsive.

Successful leaders also need to be empathetic. Expectations for workers are high; therefore, workers need to understand that the leaders know how difficult change is to accomplish and appreciate the effort they are putting in. A leader needs to “project empathy.” Such empathy is part of a larger set of people skills leaders require—ways of relating to workers and clients that help leaders convey their messages. Respondents identified the leaders in Colorado and Illinois as charismatic, albeit in different ways. Leaders in both states were described as people good at listening to others and good at making individuals feel heard and appreciated. These skills are crucial for leading large organizations within state government.

Benefits of Different Personal Attributes in Differing Situations

Just as different audiences require different messages, so too do different situations and different teams may require leaders with different styles. Leaders in Colorado and Illinois spoke of adjusting approaches when dealing with challenges, often by balancing firmness and finesse. Overwhelmed workers may benefit from a gentler tone, for instance, than a difficult contractor would. Sometimes, this approach meant speaking differently to different audiences; other times it meant splitting leadership duties across different team members, depending on communication style. Respondents praised the leadership teams in Colorado and Illinois as providing a balance of personalities and approaches that helped more effectively translate a vision for change across different groups in the states. For instance, a respondent spoke of one leader’s visionary, “big picture” thinking, balanced with another leader’s focus on implementation. Another respondent spoke of one official as a “very inspirational leader ... very effective when things aren’t going well ... helping you see that, while this is a tough moment, reminding people of the future and why they came through this work and how we can get through challenges.” In contrast, the leader’s partner helped make the vision concrete. Leaders themselves were aware of their own limitations and sought other team members who would help them: “I also look to build a team that fills in my other weaknesses.”

No leader can make change happen on his or her own, whether inside or outside state government. Leaders need cooperation and buy-in from a large constituency across levels of government and community partners. To get this buy-in, a leader has to have a strong team—people who can balance a leader’s individual weaknesses with strengths and support the needs of program administration. Leaders in Colorado and Illinois recognized this need, and all leaders praised their teams. Leaders leaned on their teams and were inspired by them, even as the leaders provided inspiration in turn. As one leader said, “If you have a really strong team around you, it’s the responsible thing to do to delegate and empower people.”

Effective Use of Tools in Professional or Educational Toolkit

Effective leaders not only recognize their limitations and know how to offset their weaknesses; they also know how to make use of their strengths. Leaders in Colorado and Illinois came from widely disparate backgrounds, with different professional skills and different educational training. But one common thread was the ability to draw on those prior experiences, no matter what they were, to face challenges and seize opportunities for change. For instance, one leader used her legal training to weigh decisions and communicate vision:

I am an attorney; the training I got in law school was about how to present your case, how to gather your facts and evidence, and how to see both sides of cases and being able to look at both sides of an issue, whether that's orally or in a written way. Those skills are what I do every day. Sometimes it is based on evidence. Sometimes it's factual; sometimes it's more emotional and gathering that information and presenting it to people. Having facts and evidence ready and being able to put it into a picture."

By contrast, another leader was trained as a social worker, and he saw his work through this lens:

I believe that an effective manager, leader, is just a really good social worker. You have to develop relationships, you have to develop a plan, you have to make sure the plan is achieving the results that you want, and, if it's not, you do it all over again. I bring the skills that I learned in social work school to work every day.

Another leader drew on her experience as a community organizer: "I have used the same principles we have used in organizing from the outside: 1) articulate the goal, 2) help people understand how that goal is linked to their vision and values, and 3) think continually about the little pieces that need to be in place to get there."

A career in finance and a personal history of volunteerism shaped another approach to leadership:

"The dual career path of finance and volunteer involvement...caused me to have a balanced view for me of what a leader does. You have the program, the mission, establishment of vision and values, and on the finance side I recognize the importance of the fiscal environment and accountability."

Effective leadership seems to be less about a particular type of training or experience and more about the ability to effectively access and implement one's training and experiences. That is, no one type of training guarantees the skills necessary to lead. Instead, strong leaders draw on their experiences and backgrounds to plan and communicate change. They have the flexibility to apply prior lessons to new situations and to respond to challenges.

Conclusion

What can these lessons teach other leaders and policymakers? The examples of leadership in Colorado and Illinois show that the challenges and pressures many states face can be seized as opportunities for positive change. Not all senior officials in state government are willing or able to innovate when facing

challenges such as court orders or federal technology mandates. The willingness of leaders in Colorado and Illinois to see these outside pressures as opportunities to make change and their skill in integrating these outside demands into a coherent strategy and vision are critical. Change can be accomplished in state government, though it is never easy. It requires establishing a clear vision, building reciprocal trusting relationships, and creating mutual accountability for measurable goals. These goals can be reached through strongly communicating well-framed goals, practicing inclusive participation, establishing transparency and honesty, taking ownership of problems, and demonstrating gains. Change also requires a leader who is flexible, humble, and empathetic. Even more, it requires a team that works together to better deliver work supports, as these leaders and teams did to help the people of Colorado and Illinois.

Notes

1. This study focused on the following state leaders: Michelle R. B. Saddler, Secretary, Illinois Department of Human Services; Jennifer Wager, Associate Director, Division of Family and Community Service, Illinois Department of Human Services; Reggie Bicha, Executive Director, Colorado Department of Human Services; Julie Kerksick, (former) Director, Office of Economic Security, Colorado Department of Human Services.

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