

Public Child Welfare Workforce Recruitment and Retention as Wicked Problems

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Nearly 25 years ago, Mason and Mitroff (1981)* emphasized an important distinction and an accompanying transition. They claimed that new, “wicked problems” were replacing tame problems.

Tame Problems

Essentially, tame problems are simple, predictable, and certain. They are amenable to reduction, easy categorization, and isolation. Here, each special problem can be paired with a special solution or intervention.

When tame problems prevail, linear, one-at-a-time planning and problem-solving are efficient and effective, and industrial age professions, organizations, and institutions suffice. In many cases, tame problems merely necessitate improved communication and coordination.

Wicked Problems

Wicked problems challenge this industrial calculus because they manifest many, and sometimes all, of the following characteristics:

- There is an obvious lack of a definitive formation or theory of the problem
- Competing theories of the problem mandate different, perhaps competing and contradictory, solutions and strategies (and resources are scarce)
- Problems are inter-connected and maybe interlocking
- There are multiple explanations for every aspect of the problem
- Direct links between cause and effect are ambiguous or lost
- The problem never ends: There is an unavoidable lack of closure
- Persistent dilemmas plague action planning.
- Wicked environmental conditions persist: High uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and many surprises are the norm amid resource shortfalls.
- Contradictory policies operate; and, chaos and contradictions appear to be socially manufactured.
- Because there are multiple targets and simultaneous needs for development, learning, and improvement, multi-lateral and multi-level solutions are needed.

* Mason, O., & Mitroff, I. (1981). *Challenging strategic planning assumptions: Theory, case, and techniques*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

In short, wicked problems accentuate uncertainty, novelty, complexity, ambiguity, and interdependence. They compel innovative thinking and, sometimes, “out of the box” solutions.

A Tipping Point or Threshold for Turnover

Although knowledge and understanding remain in short supply, it appears that there may be a tipping point, or threshold level, or agency tolerance level, for unanticipated, undesirable, and problematic turnover. This level probably varies by agency.

This much we know. Consistent, pervasive turnover creates conditions conducive to more turnover. Vicious cycles develop, as indicated in Figure 1 (attached in a separate file). Once these vicious cycles are in place, workforce turnover tends to become a wicked problem. Its “wicked nature” is apparent when it creates other problems related to recruitment, training, agency climate and culture, management and supervision, and ultimately, agency performance and client outcomes.

The Wicked Impacts of Pervasive Turnover and Recruitment Problems

When the turnover is pervasive, especially in agencies with limited abilities to recruit and retain professional social workers, other problems tend to follow. This much we’ve learned from our pilot counties and the research we’ve completed in other county systems. For example:

- ❖ Training takes longer, and it has to be simplified for persons who are not social workers
- ❖ Social work-oriented training has limited lasting impacts and transfer because the agency’s working conditions and requirements and practice demands are at odds with it
- ❖ Norms and standards of professionalism, including the ability to exercise good discretion and enjoy considerable autonomy, are difficult to justify and promote
- ❖ New caseworkers tend to be overwhelmed by the challenges of serving the most vulnerable children and families
- ❖ New caseworkers often lack the writing skills and analytical skills needed for high quality casework
- ❖ Caseworkers’ commitments to the work and to the agency vary
- ❖ Commissioners and top level managers quickly learn about the limitations of their workers; and they worry child deaths, lawsuits, and other serious problems

- ❖ Given the workforce on hand, and worried about what workers cannot do and will do, commissioners and managers institute “tighten the screws”, compliance- and control-oriented management and supervision.
- ❖ This control-oriented mode of management and supervision transforms casework from people-helping to people-processing work.
- ❖ Veteran caseworkers seeking norms and standards of professionalism resist and resent this approach, and some look to leave
- ❖ Even if formally training social workers with BSW and MSW degrees are recruited, they tend to leave quickly because the management and supervision provided contradict, even deny them opportunities to use, the professional training they’ve received.
- ❖ Turnover creates more turnover and additional recruitment problems, necessitating more tighten the screws, compliance-oriented supervision and management that results in people processing
- ❖ Agency performance flattens and may decline as the agency’s climate deteriorates, especially when workers lack good histories of working together
- ❖ Back-biting, finger-pointing and blaming dynamics, unethical behavior, and defensive behavior become commonplace.
- ❖ Vulnerable children and families are not served efficiently and effectively.
- ❖ Professional social workers, many already concerned by the conflation of other child welfare workers and certified social workers, avoid child welfare.
- ❖ As the system continues to struggle with the challenges of de-professionalization, the case for higher salaries, better benefits, and improved working conditions is more difficult to make
- ❖ In combination with the constraints imposed by the civil service system, and other constraints imposed by county boards of supervisors (e.g., only county residents may be employed), the quality of the workforce does not improve; and indeed, it may decline.

These problems nest in each other. Together they comprise a wicked problem involving recruitment, retention, agency performance, and client outcomes. Addressing wicked problem clusters like this one require innovative solutions and “out of the box” thinking and strategies. This much we know. We also know that training alone won’t solve these problems. What we don’t know is what strategies and models will solve wicked problems like this one.