



**PROMISING PRACTICES IN
FIRST NATIONS CHILD WELFARE MANAGEMENT AND
GOVERNANCE**

Touchwood Child and Family Services:
Reflecting on the Elements of Good Leadership

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Abstract

Established in 1993, Touchwood Child and Family Services holds the distinction of being the oldest First Nations child welfare agency in Saskatchewan. This fully mandated agency serves five Touchwood Bands and provides services to members both on and off reserve. Good, solid leadership is cited as one of major factors of the agency's success and will be the focus of this article.

Introduction

“This agency is blessed with very supportive leadership”

These words shared by Touchwood Executive Director, Derald Dubois, were the starting point of a discussion regarding the critical importance of good leadership and the impact that such leadership has had for Touchwood Child and Family Services. But what are the elements of good leadership? The elements that constitute good leadership as experienced by Touchwood Child and Family Services will be examined and a brief overview of the three most commonly identified forms of governance of First Nations Child and Family Services agencies will be provided. The conditions required for good leadership and the challenges involved in meeting this goal will also be explored.

Procedure

The data for this article was collected through a face to face interview with Touchwood Child and Family Services director, Derald Dubois. The interview took place at the agency office in the Daystar First Nation community, Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

Agency Background

Touchwood Child and Family Services has the distinction of being the oldest First Nations child welfare agency in Saskatchewan. Established in 1993, and fully mandated under the Saskatchewan Child and Family Services Act, Touchwood provides culturally appropriate, community-based child protection services to Daystar, Fishing Lake, Gordons, Kawacatoose and Muskowekwan band members who are resident on and off reserve. Foster care services and the repatriation of a large number of children are two primary service areas. Although the agency would like to provide prevention and family support services, it currently does not receive enough funding to do so.

Forms of Governance

Touchwood Child and Family Services, similar to the majority to First Nations child and family service providers in Canada, operates under a delegated model of child welfare in an agreement with the provincial and federal governments. In this arrangement, the First Nations agency functions under the mandate and delegated authority of provincial/territorial legislation and is funded by the federal government through Directive 20-1¹. In the review of forms of governance for First Nations child and family services agencies, data from a sample of 15 First Nations social service agency respondents to a survey conducted for the First Nations Child and Family Services Joint National Policy Review² identified three common forms of governance: Chief and

¹ Directive 20-1 is the federal funding formula, administered by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, used to delineate funding for First Nations child and family services agencies. Recent research has determined that the Directive is not adequately meeting the funding needs of First Nations child and family services providers.

² The First Nations Child and Family Services Joint National Policy Review was conducted between March 1999 – March 2000 under the joint management of the Assembly of First Nations and the Department of Indian and Northern Development. The purpose of the review was to identify possible improvements to existing policy regarding the operation and development of First Nations Child and family services

Council or Chiefs of Tribal Council, Chiefs of First Nations or Tribal Councils as Board of Directors and Board of Directors (McDonald et al., 2000).

Within the Chief and Council or Chiefs of Tribal Councils system, the First Nations Chief and Council serve as the governing body for the agency and there is no Board of Directors. The agency Director or Executive Director reports directly to the Chief and Council or Chiefs of the Tribal Council. However, there is an arms length relationship between the Chief and Council and the First Nations agency in relation to case management activities (McDonald et al., 2000).

Another common governing arrangement is one in which the Chiefs of the First Nations or Tribal Councils³ act as the Board of Directors which then functions as the governing body for the First Nations child and family service agency. In this system, the lines of authority generally move down from the Board of Directors to a Director or Executive Director of the First Nations child and family service agency (McDonald et al., 2000). The variations to this model include authority flowing from the Tribal Council to the Board of Directors or, from the Chief and Council to the Director through a General Band Manager and each First Nation having a representative on the Board. It was generally identified that the Board functions in an advisory capacity and is not involved in the daily administration or case management activities of the agency.

In the Board of Directors model, the agency has a Board of Directors with accompanying committee structures separate from the Chief and Council and Tribal Council framework. Authority flows from the Board of Directors to the Director or Executive Director of the agency. Variations in this model include authority flowing from a Committee or from the Chief and Council to the Board of Directors (McDonald et al., 2000). Once again the delineation of responsibility limits the Board's function to strategic planning and general policy development and, representation on the Board is non-political. The final decision maker in regards to administrative and case management issues is the Director of the First Nations child and family service agency.

It is important to note that in all three models of governance there is clear delineation between the roles of the governing body and the First Nations child and family service agency. The roles and responsibilities of the governing body include strategic planning, policy development, consultation and establishment of long-term goals while agency roles include carrying out the day-to-day administration, case management and planning functions for child and family services in implementing the agreement entered into with the provincial/territorial and federal governments (McDonald et al., 2000).

Leadership

Touchwood Child and Family Services has a Board of Directors composed of one representative appointed by the Chiefs of each First Nation. The Touchwood agency

agencies that provide necessary, culturally sensitive and statutory child and family services (McDonald et al., 2000).

³ Tribal Council: a regional group of First Nations members that delivers common services to a group of First Nations (www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/2002-templates).

Executive Director reports to the Board and together with the Board, reports to the Chiefs and Council of each First Nation on a quarterly basis. As local authorities, the Board of Directors and Chiefs and Council are accountable to the general population and deal with issues of policy and procedure, annual reviews, financial matters, statistical information regarding the number of children in care and the number of active and inactive foster homes. The day to day administration of the agency and case management are responsibilities of the Executive Director.

Good leadership is the key to ensuring that all pieces of the governance structure work cohesively and that the needs of children, youth and families in the community are met. Within the Touchwood experience, the cornerstones of successful leadership are identified as:

- The provision of support but also freedom and latitude for the agency director;
- The ability to engender trust between those in leadership positions and those being led by fostering an environment where people are not fearful of the leadership;
- Good communication between all levels; and
- Accountability and transparency especially with financial matters.

Good leadership functions to provide the harmony required for the various partners in the provision of child and family services to work together. Good leadership also acts as a buffer of protection for agency Directors who cannot work in isolation and need the protection of the Chief and Council in dealing with changes which provincial and federal governments might impose. As well, sound, effective leadership provides support and stability for agency activities. Stability provides a needed foundation on which agencies can grow and maintain staff which in turn bolsters the agency's credibility and accountability.

Indicators and Conditions for Success

Low staff turnover is cited as one of the strongest indicators of success and good leadership is an important factor in the agency being able to retain quality staff. Another indicator is the degree of acceptance the agency has experienced by the communities it serves. Poor leadership would have compromised the agency's integrity, effectiveness and intent as perceived by the community. And finally, longevity – the life span of the agency itself, is considered an indicator of successful leadership.

The successful leadership of any enterprise requires a careful balance of key elements. For Touchwood Child and Family Services, one of the key elements cited is trust between all partners of the governing system: Chief and Council, Board of Directors, agency Director and the community being served. Communication is also a key requirement. Transparency and accountability in terms of decision making and the utilization of resources for child and family service provision are also necessary conditions. An additional condition of success is the way in which leaders view their position; is the leader interested in acting for the common good or simply for in their own self-interest? The respect of the community is a key condition for good leadership and is

an element which is mutually reinforcing. Good leadership calls for a cooperative relationship between the Executive Director, Board of Directors and Chiefs and Council in which the roles and responsibilities of each party must be clearly understood and respected. The governing body must demonstrate respect for agency knowledge. This respect ensures that although the two have an arms length working relationship, they are able to work together at times in dealing with larger political issues.

Challenges

Providing good leadership is by no means a simple task. The most notable challenge for Touchwood Child and Family Services is the pressure which is concentrated on the Chief. The role of the Chief carries with it the assumption of accountability for anything and everything that goes wrong within the community - a dynamic which creates enormous pressure. There is a need to release some of this pressure and find ways to share accountability. Sharing accountability more equally between the child and family services agency and the Chief would provide more space for the Chief to undertake other matters is one suggested approach to this challenge.

Conclusion

Touchwood Child and Family Services was created to provide culturally relevant, community based services delivered by and for First Nations people. Good leadership is one of the critical factors in the agency's success in fulfilling its mandate to provide child protective services. Respect, accountability, trust, communication, transparency, cooperation and support are identified as the key elements of good leadership which enable Touchwood Child and Family Services to meet the needs of the communities it serves. Good leadership is credited for the agency's longevity and stability and provides a strong platform for future endeavors.

References

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