


Cultural Change Within Adult & Family Services


Over the past 10 years, Adult & Family Services (AFS), the Oregon agency that administers public-assistance programs, has achieved a far-reaching transformation of its organizational culture as well as the way it conducts business.

AFS is a division of the Oregon Department of Human Services. It administers public-assistance programs for low-income Oregonians, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, day-care subsidy programs and the state's Child Support Program.

The division employs approximately 1,900 people and operates more than 70 branches, satellite offices and "outstations" across the state. There are 15 district offices which guide and support the work of the local field offices.

Case managers in branches, who have the most extensive interaction with clients, typically carry a caseload of 90 families. These jobs include not only determining eligibility and benefits, but working with families to decide on needed services, connecting family members to the services and monitoring their progress.

Workers who primarily determine eligibility and ensure that benefits are issued carry caseloads of approximately 250.




The changes in the culture of AFS started with the 1990 Family Support Act, which required the division to redesign its welfare program. This also gave AFS the opportunity to make changes in the division itself...to change the philosophy and focus of its work.

This work of "reinvention" continued throughout the early '90's, bringing numerous innovations to the client services AFS provides. Many of those changes were part of the "Oregon Option" waiver package that was submitted to the federal government in 1995. Approval for the waiver package was received in March 1996.

Shortly after that approval, Congress passed its 1996 federal welfare-reform legislation, known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. For the most part, Oregon was allowed to continue under provisions of the Oregon Option, while also implementing a limited number of changes from the federal law.

Since 1996, Oregon has continued to refine and expand its strategy to help clients become and remain employed and improve their family stability. The success for the strategy is reflected in the state's 60 percent drop in caseload since 1994, achieved by helping clients move off welfare into jobs rather than restricting their access to the program.

Much of the AFS success is attributable to the energy, commitment and creativity of its workforce that was engendered and fostered by the last decade's cultural change.



The change in AFS has affected every part of the organization. This wide scope was necessary; We would not have been successful if we changed only the way in which field staff do their work without also addressing such things as centralized administrative and support functions.

As part of the "re-engineering" within AFS since 1990, the division has:

- Created a new model for client services based in self-sufficiency. (The model combines quick attachment to employment with necessary supportive services and payments.)
- Developed a system of Performance Measurements to chart its results
- Changed the management structure of the organization...reducing the number of managers and decentralizing decision making
- Shifted the responsibility for developing and implementing methods of serving clients from central office to the local level
- Set up an environment of worker empowerment and high-performance teams in local offices

The most important factor in achieving the cultural change within AFS was persuading workers to think about their work in a different manner and change the way they do their jobs.

Client self-sufficiency had to become the focus of all facets of the division's business, from the design of branch offices to the nature of central-office duties, the functioning of automated systems and the communication within the division.

We needed to convince staff to try something different, as well as convey that people were capable of doing the new work successfully and that it was safe to make mistakes as they tried new approaches.

Moving to the new philosophy was not an easy process, or one that happened quickly. It was truly a process of evolution; We found that staff members made the transition at different rates and we needed to support the slowest throughout the process.



To examine the process of bringing about the cultural change in AFS, it is valuable to look at what we were trying to accomplish and some of the strategies used to achieve the desired results.

This discussion is broken down into two main areas: changes in the way we approached our job, and changes in the way we actually performed our work.

Regarding the first, the success of the cultural shift in AFS depended on our staff adopting a new way of looking at their work. Specifically...

- *We wanted workers to “buy into” our new mission of self-sufficiency for clients.* In the early `90's, a new set of Mission, Goals and Principles was created, reflecting the shift to client self-sufficiency rather than simply determining eligibility and distributing benefits.

Posters of the Mission, Goals and Principles were hung in branches and small copies given to each staff member. (Two revisions have been made since 1992.)

In communicating the new mission and the thinking behind it, AFS began on the district-manager level. It was critical to have these managers “on board” before efforts began with line staff.

The new message was conveyed via meetings and retreats for district managers, where the AFS Executive Staff talked about the research behind the mission, the importance of making changes, and local management's role in accomplishing the change. District managers then became a vital part of supporting the managers and staff in their districts as they adopted the new mission.

As the scope of communication broadened to the entire workforce, the new mission was discussed frequently in the administrator's weekly e-mail “Update,” and the AFS Executive Staff made regular “road trips” to visit branches and talk about the new work

of the division. As is the case in all meetings with employees, AFS leaders urged people to ask the “tough questions” so they could resolve issues of concern to staff.

- *We wanted workers to make decisions based on principles.* The revised AFS mission includes a section on the principles that guide our work. Among them: “Work is better than welfare” and “Our job is focused on helping as many families as possible become capable of attaining self-sufficiency.”

To help AFS workers begin using the principles as part of their decision making, many offices used “policy-to-principle” exercises, in which staff figured out what a particular policy is trying to achieve in terms of client self-sufficiency.

Workers were shown how to compare their ideas for helping clients with the AFS principles, to gauge if their methods would help accomplish the division’s goals.

As part of this emphasis on principle-based decision making, the AFS policy manuals were completely revised. Instead of simply listing the policies for a particular program, the manuals now discuss the principles behind the piece of policy, thereby tying the policy to an outcome the division wishes to attain.

- *We wanted workers to recognize that all clients can make some kind of progress to improve their lives.* Though the AFS model stressed quick attachment to employment, it was also important to point out that a job is not always the first goal for every client.

As more and more people left welfare, those remaining often had multiple barriers to employment. It was important for staff to recognize that some clients can only take small steps along a continuum.

To help these recipients, teams in branches were encouraged to try one thing that could advance a client. For example, the first step for a mother might be to get her children to school regularly. Then, the case manager might ask the mother if she is

able to volunteer at school. This could lead to a work-experience position, with the goal being paid employment.

- *We wanted staff to be creative and experiment.* Throughout the process of change, very little was dictated by central office. Instead, Executive Staff issued a challenge to districts and branches to come up with answers that best suited their communities.

During their frequent branch visits, Executive Staff have been forthcoming in saying that central office “doesn’t have the answers” about how best to help clients. Central-office managers and staff can provide guidance, but local, front-line workers will be the ones to generate successful ideas.

To encourage creativity by teams and workers, managers who were asked how to do something often would respond by, in turn, asking for suggestions from the people who had posed the question. Management and staff could then evaluate the options, rather than having management decide how to do things.

Throughout the process, staff were not criticized for strategies that did not meet expectations. Instead, the ideas were viewed as part of a learning process, and further experimentation was encouraged to find methods that would be more effective.

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The second major area of change encompassed the nature of AFS offices and how people in the division perform their jobs. For example...

- *AFS no longer wanted its branches to be “welfare offices.”* The traditional welfare office presented clients with a waiting room and a closed-off area with workers’ offices. There was little indication of any other purpose than applying for and receiving benefits.

As part of the change in AFS, all of our offices have been redesigned to focus on the goal of employment. They project a business-like image that conveys respect for clients and sets an expectation of cooperation and success. The remodeled lobbies have been designed and planned by teams in the offices.

Lobbies now contain “resource rooms” for clients (often these are the first areas encountered when coming in). In many branches, resource rooms are staffed full-time with a person who can help clients use the computers, publications and other employment-focused resources. Posters and motivational materials for clients now have a prominent place in offices.

Work spaces for AFS and partner staff have been reconfigured from closed offices to an “open concept.” This promotes the exchange of ideas between workers and has also had the effect of improving client demeanor.

As part of the change in how work is performed, a few districts have chosen to specialize some of their offices. One branch might focus on working with unemployed clients, another with people who are working and transitioning off welfare. Ongoing benefits such as Food Stamps and child care might be handled by a centralized “processing center,” rather than individual branches.

- ➔ *We wanted field offices to recognize that all staff play a role in helping clients.* Under the traditional workflow in AFS offices, the majority of client interaction was viewed as occurring between case workers and clients.

As part of change to a new way of doing business, branches analyzed a client’s flow through the office and realized that many staff members have contact with clients and many opportunities exist to convey the philosophy of self-sufficiency.

In light of this, more emphasis was placed on the interaction by all staff with applicants

and clients. The message we wanted to convey centered on the advantages of work over welfare and the expectation that clients would actively participate in improving their situation.

Under the new model, all staff in most offices go to training on client-related topics... participation is not based on job title alone. Nor do job titles always govern job duties. Support staff often work directly with clients; receptionists frequently have other client-related duties.

- ➔ *We wanted people in branches to work in teams.* The functions performed by case workers had been largely independent up until the 1990's. The division concentrated on determining eligibility and issuing benefits, tasks that could be done effectively by one person.

With the shift to self-sufficiency, there were many more decisions to be made, mainly around the best services to help a client be successful. It became apparent that input from service providers and ideas from other case managers were needed.

A model based on "high-performance work teams" was used in local offices. The workers in each branch determined how their teams would be configured. Because of this local control, teams in some sites are made up entirely of one type of worker, while in others, a team may be made up of a case manager, a support-service worker, a job-retention worker and staff from partner organizations.

Training was an important part of the team-building process. AFS provided courses on interpersonal topics such as learning styles and conflict resolution, to help teams adjust to working together. One personal-growth course, "Developing Capable People" was specially adapted by AFS for its staff and clients, and proved very valuable for both audiences.

A gradual approach was very useful in helping teams become comfortable with

making independent decisions. In some offices, teams started working together by tackling a small project, like changing the branch lobby. They were given the parameters and told to decide how to accomplish the remodel.

As teams became comfortable with making decisions on their own, they were put in additional situations where they needed to work together to find solutions.

- ➔ *We wanted front-line workers to try out new ways of helping people.* The new work of AFS required new and different services for clients.

At the beginning of the cultural change, few of our staff had experience outside of benefit-focused work. Workers were uncomfortable with such things as developing employment plans for clients, monitoring their progress and holding them accountable. In addition, there was skepticism about whether the new approach would be effective.

In the transition to the new strategy, workers were first urged to choose one family in their caseload and try something different. If the experiment was successful, workers then were encouraged to try new methods with another family. This gave them a chance to become comfortable with the new way of doing business.

We found that workers gained confidence as they saw families succeed under the new course. If a client was unsuccessful, staff were encouraged to evaluate what happened, and if necessary, to make changes in their future work.

As people started doing their jobs differently, a new personnel classification was created to reflect the enhanced duties. People were moved into the classification as they showed proficiency in doing the new self-sufficiency-focused work.

- ➔ *We wanted branch staff to work collaboratively with local service providers and the community.* Local planning has been a hallmark of Oregon's welfare reform since its earliest years,

with district-wide planning groups making almost all decisions about the types of services offered and how they are delivered.

The new self-sufficiency strategy was, again, quite different from the prior approach, in which clients received few services from other agencies and there was little need to collaborate.

However, cooperation became paramount when, as part of their self-sufficiency plans, clients were required to receive services from other governmental and community organizations such as community colleges, substance-abuse programs and workforce agencies.

To enhance collaboration between everyone serving a client, many staff members from workforce partners and community agencies have been brought into AFS offices, either full or part-time. Or, in many places, offices of partner organizations are located in the same buildings or complexes as AFS.

This proximity allows partner staff to meet with clients immediately, if needed, and help case managers in formulating plans for families. Partner staff have become part of the branch teams and participate with AFS in joint “staffings” on client progress.

Also, in many areas AFS staff are outstationed full or part-time in community service centers or in partner offices.

To strengthen the relationships with partners, AFS holds training sessions on its programs and services for staff of partner organizations. Partner staff are invited to participate in statewide AFS meetings; they also can attend most regular training courses put on by AFS, as well as sessions on “best practices” in client services.

To enhance collaborative efforts, AFS staff are encouraged to become active in community organizations, such as serving on boards and participating in meetings.

- *We wanted central-office functions to become more collaborative and focus on the needs of the field.* The AFS central office provides a wide range of support for the work of the field, including such things as policy analysis, contracts, facility management, quality control, personnel, and forms production.

During the mid 1990's, AFS reorganized the structure of its central-office sections and units into cross-functional teams containing members from many different central-office sectors. We challenged members of teams to redesign their work, to make it responsive to the needs of clients and the field, and to eliminate processes that did not support our mission.

As part of that redesign process, resources that were freed up in central office were either directly transferred to field operations or put into positions that focused on supporting front-line workers.

Through the years of work that have gone into changing the culture of AFS, we have been able to identify a number of key factors in our overall success. These include:

- *The willingness to examine and change* all facets of the organization
- *Consistent communication* from the highest levels about goals, worker empowerment, the benefits of client self-sufficiency, etc.
- *Frequent branch visits* by the Exec Staff and administrator (which have continued on a regular basis through the present). This allowed staff to challenge Exec Staff on the new mission and methods. It is also a chance for Exec Staff to address current staff concerns.

- *An absolute commitment* to the new vision and worker empowerment. Even if there were “blips” in the progress of change, management had to remain steadfast in their belief in the new vision.
- *A wide range of training courses* related to the changes in philosophy and policy. The AFS Staff Development Unit changed its training model to stress flexibility, quick response, customization of training courses to local needs and local delivery of training whenever possible.
- *Adherence to the positive approach.* It was very important to always find something positive to say about people’s efforts and not to criticize them for mistakes, especially in public. Even if something wasn’t working, staff needed to be assured that it had been worth a try, and the next step would be to find another method to accomplish the desired end.
- *Realignment of central office* so the first priority of units was to support the field in its work.

Though AFS has successfully instilled a new culture of client self-sufficiency, we know that change within the organization will continue, as it does in any learning organization. The last ten years have helped give us confidence that the AFS workforce can successfully adapt to the demands of the future. Our experience has given us the tools and insights that will greatly contribute to continued success.

