



# BECOMING A Family-Focused System



Capacity Building  
CENTER FOR STATES

## Improving Culture Begins With Leaders

Leaders play a critical role in setting the tone and direction of a child welfare agency's culture and climate. In developing a family-focused system, leaders create the foundation for putting families at the center of child welfare work. A leader—someone taking a leadership role—can come from anywhere in the organization. Below are critical ways leaders influence the culture and climate of their agency. The examples are focused on family engagement, but the roles are applicable to other aspects of child welfare.

Role of Leadership	What It Looks Like
 <p><b>Establish</b> clear expectations for the agency and staff that are aligned with the agency's mission and vision. This sets the context and direction for how work should be done within the agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Communicating the rationale, implementation process, and benefit of new legislation for children and families</li> <li>◆ Partnering with key stakeholders, including staff and families currently receiving services</li> <li>◆ Clarifying the role of agency staff at all levels of the organization</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Model</b> the behaviors, values, and skills that are expected of staff. (See box on Modeling in Action.) This demonstrates the behaviors that support the values of the team.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Including families, community partners, and stakeholders on committees</li> <li>◆ Listening and creating an environment that supports two-way communication</li> <li>◆ Empathizing with caseworkers</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Embed</b> expectations in policy, training, practice models, continuous quality improvement, and coaching. This promotes consistency and clarity of processes and actions throughout the agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Conveying the value of partnering with families in new staff orientation</li> <li>◆ Checking in with staff about engaging mothers, fathers, and extended family</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Reinforce</b> expectations through recognition, ongoing communication, and consistent reminders. This keeps expectations at the forefront for all staff and stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Identifying staff who demonstrate innovative and creative engagement strategies</li> <li>◆ Sharing family success stories that exemplify engagement</li> <li>◆ Recognizing resource parents who demonstrate a strong partnership with families</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Invest</b> in the workforce through opportunities for professional development, time, and tools needed to be successful. This ensures that staff have the training and tools needed to meet agency expectations and reflect agency values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Providing opportunities for professional development</li> <li>◆ Engaging parents with experience in the child welfare system to share their stories</li> <li>◆ Inviting frontline staff to share their challenges and strategize solutions</li> </ul>

Most leaders draw their inspiration from a variety of leadership models, resulting in an eclectic approach.

Below are **three leadership models** that can contribute to building a family-focused culture.

Adaptive Leadership	Servant Leadership	Strengths-Based Leadership
<p><b>Guiding principle:</b></p> <p>To share responsibility and adaptation to change for the success of the organization</p>	<p><b>Guiding principle:</b></p> <p>To be in service to the organization, staff, and families and community served</p>	<p><b>Guiding principles:</b></p> <p>To focus on the strengths of the organization and staff and to bring together diverse groups to solve complex problems</p>
<p><b>Adaptive leadership can help leaders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Navigate large-scale change</li> <li>◆ Focus on the “view from the balcony,” providing high-level perspective and context</li> <li>◆ Empower staff to do the work they were hired to do</li> <li>◆ Anticipate future opportunities and challenges</li> <li>◆ Encourage innovation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Servant leadership can help leaders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Create a value-driven system</li> <li>◆ Build capacity by committing to the growth of others</li> <li>◆ Develop leaders at different levels within the organization</li> <li>◆ Build trust and empathy</li> <li>◆ Provide stewardship</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths-based leadership can help leaders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Build diverse teams and gather different perspectives</li> <li>◆ Increase transparency</li> <li>◆ Support staff in building on their strengths</li> <li>◆ Encourage innovation</li> <li>◆ Set clear expectations</li> </ul>

### Modeling in Action

Modeling helps leaders lead by example. Consider an agency that is using Signs of Safety (a strengths-based, safety-organized approach to child protection casework) as part of its practice model. When working with children and families, caseworkers ask three key assessment questions:

- ◆ What are you worried about?
- ◆ What is going well?
- ◆ What needs to happen?

Leadership, managers, and supervisors can demonstrate modeling in action by using the same three questions to:

- ◆ Organize senior management and staff meetings
- ◆ Discuss program implementation with team members
- ◆ Guide individual clinical supervision

For more information: <https://www.signsofsafety.net/>

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Find more information on leadership and culture on the Becoming a Family-Focused System webpage: <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/family-focused-system>