

Signs of Success: A
Strength-based
Approach to System-
Wide Quality
Improvement

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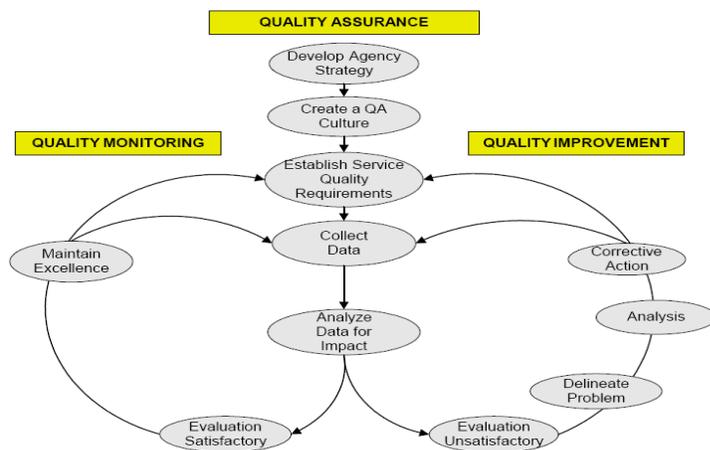
Success starts quietly; it can be overlooked in the noise and clatter of problems (adapted from Madsen, 2007).

Where did this all begin?

In April 2009, the Metis Child and Family Services Authority (MA) received a proposed Quality Assurance (QA) framework. The QA framework stems from the recent reviews of the CWS in Manitoba, subsequent recommendations to the Authorities specific to QA and the QA mandate of the MA. Specifically, the recommendations were:

- That CFS Authorities identify outcome-oriented objectives and priorities for the provision of services...consistent with the department (CFS Division) objectives and priorities.
- That the CFS Authorities develop output/outcome measures (contained in a strategic plan) on which CFS mandated agency performance would be assessed.
- That the CFS Authorities develop a risk- based QA review plan that scheduled mandated agency reviews on a bi-annual cycle for mandated agencies.
- That the mandated agencies utilize the output/outcome measures provided by the CFS Authorities, on which their performance would be assessed.

The QA framework presented was the Ontario Association of Children’s Aide Societies (OACAS) QA framework which attempts to respond to these recommendations as well as a focus on the connection of outcomes and performance measures to compliance with standards of best practice.



In Response to the Framework

The **Signs of Success (S/S)** was developed in response to the proposed implementation of the Ontario Association of Children’s Aide Societies (OACAS) QA Framework. The MA found that although the QA framework provided for the ease of use and direction of traditionally accepted cyclical quality assurance methods, it did not

specifically address the necessary approach for successful and meaningful organizational development and collaborative analysis. The S/S works to bring life to the traditional evaluative frameworks which attempt to incorporate the voices of children, families, communities and staff across the system.

S/S is a strength-based approach for creating system-wide improvements in Child Welfare that is inspired by and consistent with the work of Turnell & Edwards (1999). S/S is designed in direct contrast to the problem-oriented, risk-based reviews that are the dominant focus within Child Welfare improvement efforts around the world. S/S purposefully stimulates the key qualities of organizational change in child welfare: reflection, appreciation, and shared learning (see Madsen & Miller, 2010) and communicates these changes to all stakeholders with the authentic voice of stakeholders.



Theoretical Roots (Quality Assurance vs. Signs of Success)

Quality Assurance is defined by the service recipient and refers to the degree of excellence of the service as well as to the promise or guarantee of quality services provision (Goodman, Leblanc & Lumsden, 2004). The very basic elements of QA is about learning what you are doing well and doing it better. It is also what you need to change to make sure you meet the needs of service recipients. Examples of traditional QA activities include: file audits, program reviews, child death reviews, funding and data analyses, foster care licensing, and agency accreditation.

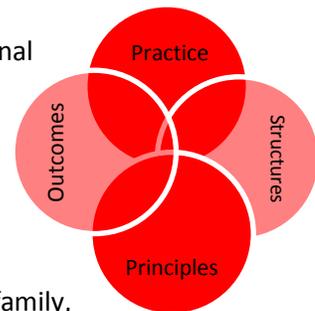
While the QA framework brings forward methods and processes for monitoring and making recommendations on quality, Signs of Success also brings forward strength-based approaches for inclusive and balanced framework implementation and collaborative analysis. S/S moves beyond recommendations and monitoring to collaborative understanding and action.

The Signs of Success recognizes four important bodies of literature that have contributed to the approach. First, solution focused brief therapy (De Shazer, 1985; De Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, Nunnally, Molnar, Gingerich, 1986); second, appreciative inquiry as an approach for gaining insight (Cooperrider, 1986); third, participatory action research as an approach for stimulating change (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998); and fourth, Senge's (1990) work on reflective organizations. These bodies of literature point to the truth that the things that are going well must be leveraged into every situation that requires improvement or difficult change; we get better by doing more of what already works well. True change happens when we together agree what needs to change and are invested in bringing it to fruition. S/S brings these truths and bodies of knowledge together in a practical approach for improving the quality of child welfare services.

Conceptualization of Quality (What is Success?)

Quality Assurance approaches in Child Welfare tend to focus on compliance with rules as a key measure of quality. S/S states that quality is a balance of complex interrelationships between four dimensions, these dimensions of quality are:

- **What we do (Practice)** - Case management practices and professional discretion, for example
- **What we are told to do (Structures)** – Including Regulations, Standards, and Directives
- **The spirit in which we do it (Principles)** – The Vision, Mission and Principles of the Agency, Practice Principles, etc.
- **The difference it makes (Outcomes)** – Including indicators of child, family, system, and community well-being



These dimensions of quality are not inherently complementary; conflicts are inevitable. Success is considered the result of these four dimensions of quality being balanced in importance and congruent in purpose. Quality is compromised when certain dimensions are elevated in importance or devalued

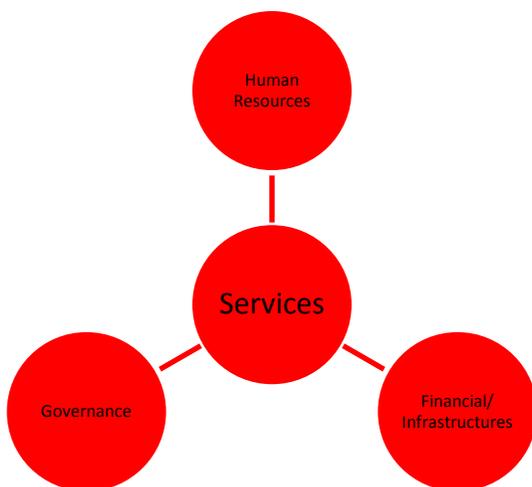


relative to the other dimensions; the system falls out of balance and quality suffers. Similarly, these dimensions must enable and facilitate the others, when a dimension works against the purpose of the other dimensions the system stalls and quality deteriorates. As one example, we change the *structure* to be more in line with *practice* but only if it is consistent with organizational *principles* and leads to better *outcomes*. Various other interacting influences could be noted.

As such the S/S framework maintains that success is being focused on improving quality one adjustment at a time; adjustments that bring the whole system closer to balance and congruence.

Organizational Scope (What does System-wide mean?)

S/S believes that the quality of service is a direct result of congruence and balance of the WHOLE organization; success cannot result unless the entire organization embraces and moves toward meaningful change (Stringer, 1999). S/S suggests that the best way to move toward quality as a system is to have each component of the organization move under the same framework together. The key components of Child Welfare organizations tend to be:



- **Services** – the scope of programs and services provided;
- **Human Resources** – including recruitment, retention, training, professional development, succession planning, business continuity planning, and workplace cultural competence;
- **Governance** – stakeholder relationships and communication, foundations documents, skill development and board evaluations; and
- **Financial and Infrastructures** – financial audits, IT systems and supports, capital infrastructure, strategic management plans, and insurance/liabilities.

Any review or change effort that focuses on only one part of the organization will likely find that the resulting change remains imbalanced and/or incongruent, but only in a different way than it was before. Making adjustments for balance and congruence across the whole system is the best approach for improving quality.

Although the scope of Signs of Success framework is system-wide, it can be apportioned through the development of key components or profiles. Each profile examines the breadth and depth of the organization's service or infrastructure by recognizing its outcomes, practices, principles and structure. More specifically, the profiles' scopes are defined by the first person perspective, meaning that data



collection and collaborative analysis include *Child Well-being, Family Well-being, Community Well-being and System/Staff Well-being* and are inclusive of these stakeholders' authentic voices and perspectives.

Key Stakeholder (Who's voice matters?)

S/S is an inclusive, anti-oppressive approach to system improvements that systematically engages all major child welfare stakeholders, including those who would not naturally have an influential voice. These major stakeholders are:

- **Leadership** – executive management and board members
- **Staff** – employees and volunteers that provide services
- **Service recipients** –the children and families that receive child welfare services
- **Community members** – all other Metis & Inuit persons and collaborative agencies around Manitoba



One of the keys to the success for S/S is the broad engagement strategy in relation to staff, service recipients, and community members. S/S believes that the clearest understanding of what needs to change and many of the best solutions come from grass roots stakeholders; those stakeholders that are not normally honoured with a voice of influence (Stringer, 1999). These voices are systematically elevated up the hierarchy of the organization to those with the power to implement the change.

S/S makes every effort to hear these voices in the most effective and efficient way possible. Engagement processes are primarily focused on key aspects of quality to ensure the feedback is as focused and practical as possible, and makes every effort to hear the authentic voice of stakeholders in a timely, unobtrusive and respectful manner.

Collecting the Information (Developing profiles)

The Signs of Success approach develops profile areas versus collecting vast amounts of abstract data which is often inter-related, however, rarely connected. The profile development allows for the inter-connectedness of abstract information to build a story that can make a difference. For example, what does it mean to be a child in care, an involved family, an employee or a part of the community governance structure within the system. Profiles are built with attention to the first person perspective. Profiles connect the experiences of children in care with evidence and trends collected using a variety of empirical approaches; this results in a more balanced and compelling document (see Elliott, 2005).

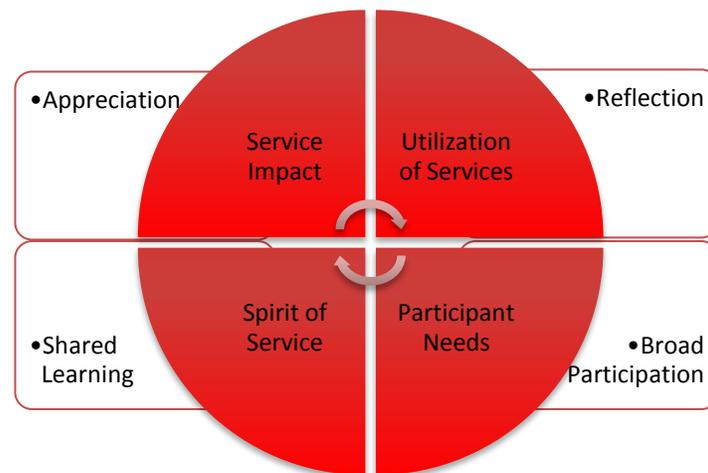


The content and format of profiles vary but each profile should incorporate:

- Volume and type of services being provided (utilization of service)
- Characteristics of those receiving the service (participant needs)
- Outcome of the service (impact the service makes)
- Stakeholder satisfaction of the service (regarding the spirit in which it was provided)
- A collaboratively created interpretation of these trends and stories
- An agreed upon understanding of what needs to stay the same and what needs to change

Collaborative Analysis (We have compiled the information, so what does it mean?)

The concept of collaborative analysis is a key component of the Signs of Success approach to improving quality in Child Welfare. A collaborative analysis approach has been adopted in order to create a meaningful interpretation of the trends and stories collected in the profiles; these interpretations are NOT made from 'on high' or from a 'managerial' worldview (Munro, 2004), but are co-constructed by various grass roots stakeholders (see Elliott, 2005). As part of the approach the Signs of Success team, comprised of a broad range of stakeholders, review and discuss the profile's trends and stories. Within this environment of reflection, appreciation, and shared learning, a co-constructed understanding is attained. This process leads people collectively through a process from complaining to commitments and from commitments to a shared vision of what is going to change (see Senge, 1990).



Collaborative Analysis (But how will we know what to change?)

Coming to a common understanding of the trends and stories enables the organization to make grounded decisions about what needs to change and what needs to stay the same. Change should happen on the individual AND organizational level; reflection, appreciation and learning processes often enlighten areas where a practitioner can improve his/her personal practice but also where the organization can improve its structures and processes. Both need to happen together in order to achieve balance and congruence across the dimensions of quality.



Not changing things that should change and/or changing things that should stay the same can lead to frustration or a sense of helplessness across the system.

At the same time, there must be a balance between change and stability (staying the same), both personally and organizationally (Elliott, 2005). Not enough change can lead to a sense of boredom and lack of vision. Too much change can lead to burn out, lack of staff buy in, and the subsequent failure to implement anything well.

The key is to change the things that will actually need to change to improve quality. The best way to know what to change is to increase organizational depth (adapted from Baldwin, 2004) by empowering:

- Reflective Practitioners – staff that have the support to reflect and learn after practicing case management discretion; this is done within the context of trusted coworkers and could include the discussion of ‘outside of the box’ practices.
- Reflective Management – managers are too often required to be gatekeepers of the status quo (ensure the rules are followed) and often, for this reason, become key barriers of change. Conversely managers may be overwhelmed by their portfolio and lack reflection in their day to day decision making; as a result, staff may be micro-managed (limiting practice discretion) or fail to provide any guidance (limiting structural oversight).
- Participation by all stakeholders (including service participants) – Since changes imposed from above are often undermined from below, all changes must be collaboratively identified and implemented. In general this involves powerful stakeholders (management) dispersing their right to make decisions across the organization, whereby giving community members, staff and participants an active role in the articulation and implementation of change.
- Reflection on the root factors that need to be addressed

Business analysts use the MARS Model (see McShane & VonGlinow, 2009) for understanding private sector change within the context of the root factors sustaining current behaviour and impeding progress. These factors are highly interrelated and directly affect performance and outcomes. They are:

- **Motivation** – including a persistent and focused goal
- **Ability** – including skill competencies and job matching
- **Role Perceptions** – including understanding of roles and best practices for fulfilling them
- **Situational Factors** – including workload and budgets

For example, a service administration support person is skilled in running reports (ability), self taught on how to use the latest tools to extrapolate data (motivation), and understands how this information will help management make decisions (role perception), but does not have the required access to the data files (situational factors). Unless all of the elements of the MARS model are satisfied, quality will be negatively impacted. Co-created actions must consider the root cause of the issue.



Success within the Child Welfare system requires that organizational adjustments toward balance and congruence, often suggested by grass roots stakeholders and supported through quantitative evidence, are implemented within the context of the root factors sustaining the imbalance and incongruence. This approach helps ensure that remedial actions actually promote short and long-term success.

Comprehensive Feedback (How do we respect reciprocity with our stakeholders?)

S/S not only honours the value of key stakeholders by giving them a voice of influence, it also requires that Leadership is accountable to its stakeholders for providing information regarding:

- The various strengths within the system relating to each dimension of quality; these successes could be considered for wider implementation
- Key worries that require a response for each dimension of quality, as well as
- Grassroots solutions to prioritized worries
- An action plan with timelines for implementing the best solutions.

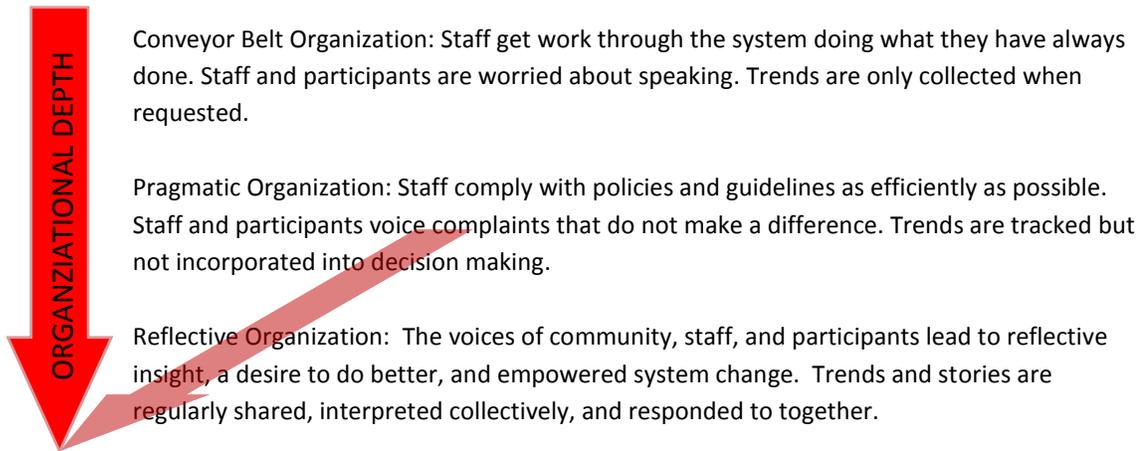


Signs of Success (How will we know we are on the right track?)

As organizations embrace S/S they will notice several changes; some signs that an organization is on the path to success include:

1. The four dimensions of quality (and their congruence and balance) are discussed before major decisions.
2. The whole organization improves together (not one part of the organization telling another part of the organization to improve).
3. Voices from the grassroots (children and other normally marginalized stakeholders) are systematically heard across the system.
4. Organizational culture is incorporates reflection, appreciation and shared learning (not urgency, blame and cover your butt).
5. The organization's depth grows.





Adapted from Chapman & Field (2007)

In Summary

S/S is designed to bring out the best in our organizations, communities, staff, and families. It makes every effort to do what is productive and what moves us together toward a balanced and congruent quality of service. For these reasons, S/S is very different than other approaches for creating changes within the child welfare system. Some of the key differences are summarized below:

Traditional Child Welfare quality improvement approaches	Signs of Success
Blaming and judgemental	Shared Learning and Resolutions
Reactive	Reflection
Focus on compliance to rules (standards)	Holistic review of quality
Focus on file reviews	Triangulates quality by using a variety of approaches
Major recommendations regarding structures and roles	Regular 'find and fixes' implemented (both short and long term)
Identifies historical problems /reactions (counting damage)	Does our work better today (preventing the damage)
One part of the system tells another part of the system to do a better job	The whole system adjusts and becomes more balanced and congruent together
Moves from problems to recommendations	Moves from worries to solutions (with a consideration of the factors sustaining the worry) to collaborative change

S/S requires organizations to move toward a spirit of reflection, appreciation and shared learning by bringing these differences to life. These strength-based practices will bring organizations toward balance, congruence and ultimately sustainable success.





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APPENDIX A: ANNUAL SCOPE OF SIGNS OF SUCCESS PROFILES

	Profile Description
Preparation	Clarifying scope of profile area, schedule maps, interviews and tool collection, identify key indicators/trends/outcomes, etc.
Mapping and interviews	Mapping with regional staff and community members; interviewing (AIs) families, children and leadership.
Compiling tools and statistics	Collecting tools (3-houses, wizards/fairies, maps) and analysing statistics (child, family and community wellbeing).
Collaborative analysis	Analysing themes (from maps, interviews, tools) and trends (from statistics) within rubric framework, determining findings and developing profile report collaboratively; a co-creation of the 'as is' state.
Reporting back findings	Communicating report back to stakeholders that will include a summary of: the overall assessment of quality, themes and trends from data and an action plan to enhance key dimensions of quality.
Communication of Action Plan	Action plan will include annual work plans with actions, timelines, responsibilities and resources required.
Implementation	The implementation of the action plan will include quick fixes and long term solutions that could take several years to implement.

Profiles	CIC	Family Services	Alt. Care	Intake/Abuse Investigation	Family Enhancement
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Preparation	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar
Mapping and Interviews	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun
Compiling maps, tools, statistics	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep
Collaborative analysis	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec
Reporting back finding	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar
Communication of Action Plan	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar
Implementation of Action Plan	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years



Profiles	Human Resource	Finance	Governance	Information Technology	Capital Infrastructure
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Preparation	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar	Jan –Mar
Mapping and Interviews	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun	Apr – Jun
Compiling maps, tools, statistics	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep	Jul – Sep
Collaborative analysis	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec	Oct-Dec
Reporting back finding	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar
Communication of Action Plan	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar	Jan - Mar
Implementation of Action Plan	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years	Up to 4 years

2010 will also focus on building capacity, buy in, and developing a S/S culture

Prioritization of future reviews is tentative and flexible based on changing priorities of the Metis Child Welfare System.



SIGNS OF SUCCESS GRAPHICALLY DISPLAYED

