



The Critical Role of Leadership in Implementing Family Group Decision Making

By The Honorable Todd A. Hoover

“Leadership is ultimately about creating a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen.”

- Alan Keith, Lucas Digital (Kouzes & Posner, 2002)

That “something extraordinary” in Pennsylvania is family group decision making (FGDM), an exciting, innovative, and evidence-based practice. There is no other practice I have observed that brings more enthusiasm and opportunities to systems, caseworkers, community members, and families.

From the perspective of a Juvenile Court Judge who has watched this practice grow, watched people do more than they thought they could do, and watched as amazing things happened throughout Pennsylvania, FGDM is a win/win proposition. I have seen that leadership and commitment to the principles of FGDM have been a deliberate and core element in Dauphin County’s implementation of FGDM and its progression throughout Pennsylvania.

But, while countless studies demonstrate the effectiveness of FGDM (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford, 2003; Coates, Umbreit, and Vos, 2002.; Dobbin, Gatowski, Litchfield, and Robinson, 2002), few have examined in-depth the critical role of this type of leadership in implementing the FGDM practice.

The Statewide Implementation Team assumed the leadership role in Pennsylvania’s implementation of FGDM, which began with approximately 50 individuals, representing 12 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties. The team has primary responsibility for developing training, county supports, evaluation processes, and all other aspects of FGDM. By adhering to FGDM’s core values and elements, this team has been able to guide the spread of FGDM throughout Pennsylvania. Today, in 2005, FGDM bi-monthly team meetings have averaged 150 participants, representing more than 30 counties.

Committed leadership, along with well-intentioned practitioners and involved family members, is imperative, especially for diverse communities, in establishing FGDM while sustaining the practice’s core elements and providing the flexibility to meet communities’ unique needs.

What I’ve experienced in Dauphin County is that leadership and commitment is demonstrated by many individuals, including caseworkers, family members, community partners, commissioners, judges, administrators, and others. This shows that to effectively implement FGDM a community’s formal and informal leaders should be looked for, involved, and focused on in every aspect of implementation.

Leaders steer the course in line with FGDM

Leaders who steer the course in implementing FGDM transform historically paternalistic and professional-driven attitudes and practices into family-driven practice by mirroring and respecting the FGDM practice itself. In exploring the practice, it becomes clear that concepts such as “widening the circle,” focusing on “strengths,” giving the “family” (however defined) responsibility for decisions, “investing” in family through preparation, and respecting “traditions” are important. These concepts manifest into the FGDM elements of preparation and coordination, private family time, a meal of some sort, family choice in all aspects of the conference, sharing of information using strengths-based language, and the voluntary nature of the process.

Leaders in FGDM implementation believe in these core philosophies. They focus on mirroring the practice and respecting the core concepts in everything they do.

Leaders share lessons

After observing FGDM implementation in Pennsylvania our successes, struggles, and transformation it has become clear that the Statewide Implementation Team’s activities, vision, and leadership have been critical in strengthening and sustaining our efforts. Lack of this type of effective and committed leadership may compound struggles in implanting FGDM and has the potential to jeopardize success. As a result, there are communities implementing the practice, but struggling to sustain it. Those groups and others can benefit from the leadership lessons learned in Dauphin County:

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- Involve as many people as you can, as early as you can, in as many different ways as you can. Everyone, including representatives from the legal community, has a seat at the table and a role to play when it comes to child, family, and community safety. These are your leaders.
- Plan for the transformation that will come with implementing FGDM. Expect families to succeed. Expect change to be, at times, a challenge. Expect the very best from your community. We most often get what we are looking for—good or bad.
- Expect setbacks and learn from them. FGDM is about partnering in ways that are often new to organizations and communities. “Even with the best intentions, shared leadership takes time, and mistakes invariably occur. A key to successful partnering is the willingness to learn from each other.” (Williams, 2002)
- Build evaluation into the implementation from the very beginning. Define what you want to accomplish—know what success means to you and make sure you’re capturing the information you need to ascertain financial viability.
- Commit to staying true to the core values of FGDM. Don’t shortcut any of the core values. In doing so, you shortcut families, and compromise the practice and positive outcomes for children and families.
- Keep the process voluntary. When judges order FGDM, it gives ownership to the bench, not the family. Judges’ roles should be to suggest and encourage.
- Observe a conference and get others to do the same. Talking, reading, and hearing about it dim in comparison to actually experiencing it.
- Finally, make this a practice, not a program. When budgets get tight and times are lean, “programs” are easily cut. Practice (the way people think and act) is nearly impossible to cut.

Leaders recognize the need for time and perseverance

FGDM works in communities where the leadership is serious about doing it right, involving people and the courts, and making lives better. If FGDM does not work in your community, it is likely not FGDM but the implementation of it that needs to be scrutinized. As cited by Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford (2003) in their review of various FGDM projects, “...implementing FGDM takes time and perseverance, and various planning activities are necessary to help underpin FGDM implementation, practice, and sustainability.”

Conclusion

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., said it best: “Man’s mind once stretched by a new idea can never regain its original dimension.” Clearly, FGDM changes the dimension of our thinking and, thus, the scope and direction of our actions. It is this new dimension of thinking that will change the way we work with families and communities, to the ultimate benefit of our children. While families, service providers, community members, and the courts, all benefit; most importantly, children benefit.

FGDM challenges our beliefs about families and their interest and capacity to make plans for their children. And once those beliefs are proven wrong, we cannot go back to the “old way of doing business.” Effective leaders must emerge to steer the course, share their knowledge, and recognize the need for time and perseverance in implementing FGDM.

References

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