

## INCREASE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Resilience in children provides a critical factor in their ability to survive and thrive during challenges and changes. Resilience is also important in organizations. It can help an organization survive and thrive during challenges and changes, including changes in key managers.

### Key Characteristics of Resilient Organizations

There are three key characteristics of resilient organizations: 1) they are mission-driven, 2) they use their data to determine how to fulfill their mission, and 3) they are willing and able to change to strengthen their ability to follow their mission.

**Resilience:** the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune; buoyancy.

*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.*  
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### MISSIONDRIVEN

A resilient program uses a strong, clear mission to guide what it does and how it does it. The mission is not just a lovely platitude posted by the front door; it is the driving force behind its decisions. The mission is the touchstone that guides the program's decisions about how to meet any challenges and opportunities.

### PLANNING BASED ON DATA

A resilient program is not afraid to look hard at its data, and identify its strengths and opportunities as well as the challenges it faces. Sometimes this may mean letting go of ways of doing things that are not supporting the mission, but are comfortable or ensconced in the program's culture or history. This can also include deciding that the next key manager needs different skills and knowledge in order to meet the future opportunities and challenges to the program's mission.

### ABILITY TO CHANGE

Knowing what you need to do in order to follow your mission is not enough. A program must also possess the willingness and ability to make change happen. A resilient program is able to move quickly to implement necessary changes so it can more effectively follow its mission and vision.

### Fundamental Ways to Increase Organizational Resilience

In addition to using its mission and data to guide decisions and actions, a resilient program strengthens its internal systems and resources so that a temporary or permanent absence of a key manager does not interfere with the program's ability to deliver high quality, comprehensive services to children and families. There are four fundamental ways you can build your program's resilience:

- Rely on systems instead of individuals
- Build individual capabilities
- Foster effective working relationships, and
- Maintain reliable and relevant communications

### *“REPLACE RELIANCE ON INDIVIDUALS WITH RELIANCE ON SYSTEMS”<sup>1</sup>*

Your program may include amazing people who can juggle countless details and know, inside and out, how to keep the systems in your program running smoothly. However, if one of those amazing key managers is suddenly absent, either temporarily, or permanently, will those systems continue to run smoothly? This is a critical question to ask of all key managers:

“If you were suddenly not available, will someone else be able to figure out what needs to be done, and when and how, to ensure that the program continues to provide high quality services to children and families?”

In a resilient program, the reliance is on systems, not on a few individuals who know how to make everything work smoothly. Some of the ways to ensure that your program is reliant on effective systems instead of amazing individuals who may not always be there include:

- **Strong internal systems:** Efficient, well-planned systems support the delivery of high quality services to children and families and ensure that the program meets all Head Start regulations. Do all of your systems work well together? Are there quirks or confusions in any of your internal systems that interfere with people’s ability to do their work effectively and meet all regulations? Increase the resilience of your program by periodically reviewing your systems and assessing how well they are working individually and together. Minimizing or removing confusions and quirks increases your program’s ability to survive and thrive during any changes or stresses in your program.
- **Documentation of systems:** Critical information about internal systems should not be in the sole possession of one key manager: it should be available to whoever needs to step in during a manager’s absence. Thoroughly and accurately document how your systems work, so that whoever needs to step in during a key manager’s absence can easily understand what needs to be done, when and how. To be effective, this documentation must be updated regularly, so staff are provided with up-to-date and complete directions on how to keep things running smoothly.
- **Task Lists for Key Manager Positions:** Key managers should have current, accurate documentation of what they do, when, and how, including key relationships that support their work. This could be in the form of a task list, a timeline, or a calendar. Someone who has to suddenly step into a key manager’s role can use the task list, calendar or timeline to guide what they do to enable the program to continue to provide high quality services to children and families, and to continue to meet the Head Start requirements.
- **Develop and Maintain Your Emergency Plan:** Resilient organizations know that the unexpected can happen, such as a sudden temporary or permanent absence of a key manager. Resilient organizations prepare themselves for this possibility by maintaining an updated emergency plan.

An emergency plan details specific information critical to the daily operations of a program. For example: who will be in charge if the director is absent for a sustained period of time; where are important financial documents kept; who knows the pass

codes to enter buildings or to open secure computer programs; how will staff and families be informed about the change and how it might affect them?

Developing, documenting and updating your systems and task lists initially takes time and effort. However, the time and energy spent in developing your systems and task lists is far less than the countless hours of frustration and confusion when a manager is not there. Once these systems and task lists are documented, it will take much less time to periodically update them.

And even more importantly, children and families are depending on your program's ability to continue to provide high quality services, regardless of a manager's unexpected absence. Relying on strong, documented internal systems will strengthen your program's resilience, and minimize interruptions in services during any temporary or permanent changes in key managers.

### ***STRENGTHEN CAPABILITY***

A resilient organization not only focuses on effective, documented systems, it also builds the knowledge and skill of their staff. This staff capability is critical when there is a sudden or planned absence of a key manager; someone knows how to do what needs to be done and is ready to step up to the plate to ensure that services to children and families do not suffer.

Given the complexity of Head Start programs and the comprehensive nature of the services they provide, a wise program intentionally and thoughtfully develops the leadership and skill development of its staff. Some ways to foster staff capabilities include:

- **Cross Training:** Training staff to learn aspects of each other's roles provides multiple benefits to a program. A key benefit is that if one of the staff is suddenly absent, someone else is able to step in and ensure that critical tasks and processes continue despite the absence. An additional benefit is that staff understand each other's jobs and are better able to assist in the development of strong effective systems across the different components of the program.
- **Developmental work assignments:** These are projects or tasks that are assigned to support specific professional growth goals for a staff member. These assignments are designed with clearly defined goals in a specified time frame, to provide a learning opportunity for the employee as well to meet a specific need of the organization.

An example of a developmental work assignment is giving a strong lead teacher the opportunity to lead a group analyzing a set of data for the Self-Assessment. The teacher is given specific guidelines, timelines and goals, along with ongoing support. After the group finishes their analysis, the teacher and supervisor review the project, discussing challenges, successes, and further skill development goals.

Developmental work assignments offer other benefits in addition to building the ability of staff to step in when someone else is not there. These assignments provide staff with opportunities to work on their own professional development; and provide programs with a way to identify skills and talent they want develop within their program.

### **FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS**

Head Start programs depend on positive, effective working relationships. Programs put a lot of energy into developing and maintaining strong relationships between staff and families. Resilient programs also pay attention to building and maintaining strong relationships between staff, Board and Policy Council.

Support staff in developing positive working relationships with the Board and Policy Council. Give individuals opportunities to present information or ideas to the Board or Policy Council, or to work with a committee of the Board or Council on a specific task. This prepares them to work with the Governing Body or Policy Council if it is needed due to a temporary or permanent absence of someone who works more often with these groups.

### **MAINTAIN RELIABLE & RELEVANT COMMUNICATIONS**

One of the critical and often ignored aspects of any effective succession plan is how the program will provide ongoing, reliable communications about how the program is managing the leadership change. Change is difficult for individuals and for groups, and if sufficient information is not provided on a regular basis, rumors and fears become a primary unofficial information source.

Staff, families, Governing Body and Policy Council members and community partners all need frequent, relevant communications. Communications should use different channels and methods to provide multiple ways for them to hear and understand what is going on and connecting it to the goal of fulfilling the mission and vision of the program. Individuals and groups may also need opportunities to ask questions and discuss what is going on, to help them work through some of the fears and concerns that are generated during leadership changes.

### **Summary**

Organizational resilience is not a step-by-step process, but an ongoing approach to how individuals work together to fulfill the mission and vision of their program. It requires strong individuals as well as strong systems, and cooperation and collaboration across all the different sectors of a program. Organizational resilience is not just a characteristic, but a way of doing business that is critical to the ability of a Head Start program to survive and thrive within a changing landscape.

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<sup>i</sup> [Succession Planning: The Elephant in the Room](http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NPLibrary/NP_Bd_SuccessionPlanning_Art.htm). Hildy Gottlieb. ReSolve, Inc. 2006.  
[http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NPLibrary/NP\\_Bd\\_SuccessionPlanning\\_Art.htm](http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NPLibrary/NP_Bd_SuccessionPlanning_Art.htm)