

# Promoting Continuous Improvement in Delivering Career Resources and Services

**Professor James P. Sampson, Jr**

Inaugural Professorial Lecture, University of Derby



Dr. Jim Sampson, Professor of Psychological Services at Florida State University, USA, began working with the Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS) at the University of Derby in early 1999. He was then appointed Visiting Professor of Career Development and Management. Since then, Jim has made a significant contribution to CeGS' work with national career service organisations within and outside of higher education and Connexions services in England.

The Centre for Guidance Studies team is extremely grateful to him for his continuous support. Jim's work at a regional, national and international level has proven that academic research does have a very practical application in supporting the delivery of high quality services for young people and adults.

### Acknowledgments

The Centre for Guidance Studies would like to thank formally the organisations highlighted below for their generous support of 'Career Guidance Week' which was held from 26th to 30th June 2006. We are also indebted to the individuals who attended events throughout the week and to everyone who assisted with the planning and organisation of this highly successful event.

The author would like to thank Deirdre Hughes, Director of CeGS; Lauren Sampson; Sandra Sampson; and Tony Watts for their reviews of preliminary drafts of this paper. He is also grateful to Cassandra Smisson for providing assistance with the literature review.



The Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS) is owned by the University of Derby. The Centre aims to bridge the gap between guidance theory and practice. It supports and connects guidance practitioners, policy-makers and researchers through research activities and learning opportunities, and by providing access to resources related to guidance and lifelong learning.

Further copies of this paper are available from the Centre for Guidance Studies or can be downloaded from the CeGS website at [www.derby.ac.uk/cegs](http://www.derby.ac.uk/cegs)

Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB  
Tel: 01332 591267  
Fax: 01332 597726  
Email: [cegsenquiry@derby.ac.uk](mailto:cegsenquiry@derby.ac.uk)  
Centre Director: Deirdre Hughes

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine factors that influence continuous improvement in the design and delivery of career resources and services for young people and adults. I base this examination on my understanding of the literature on organizational change, as well as my experience as a consultant to organizations seeking to improve the delivery of career resources and services. I will begin by briefly describing my experience as a consultant to provide a context for understanding my point of view. I will then present my analysis of the factors that contribute to and detract from continuous improvement. I will conclude with a few thoughts about the challenges we face and a possible future.

My initial specialization in career guidance involved the design and implementation of computer-assisted career guidance systems. In 1978 I began consulting with higher education institutions to help them implement this technology as part of their efforts to improve career guidance services. My focus was on the development of counseling strategies and the integration of these computer systems with other existing career resources and services. I quickly realized that the way in which an organization implemented change indicated a great deal about the culture and overall effectiveness of the organization.

I also began working with computer-assisted career guidance system developers to create implementation strategies for organizations using their software. I learned a great deal about the challenges that organizations faced in just maintaining their services. While many managers and staff were strongly committed to improving their services, they often had little staff time, financial resources, or organizational support for change. My colleague Bob Reardon and I came to the conclusion that the potential of this technology in career guidance was not being fully realized and that the difficulty had more to do with the way in which organizations managed change than it did with the actual technology being used. More recently, I have focused on the use of information and communication technology in career guidance, especially on the design and use of Internet Web sites in career service delivery. Marcus Offer, Tony Watts, and I worked to help career services in higher education design and implement Web sites. It became obvious that while the technology was new, the complexity of organizational change remained the same as before.

In 1987 I began collaborating with Gary Peterson, Bob Reardon, and Janet Lenz to create a cognitive

information processing approach to career problem solving and decision making (Peterson, Sampson, Lenz & Reardon, 2002). This approach seeks to maximize the cost-effectiveness of career resources and services. As part of the Federal Government's effort to establish one-stop career centers in the United States, we were asked to train staff from various states in the use of our differentiated service delivery model. I was then involved in helping to implement the model in one-stop career centers in North Carolina and Oklahoma. I was asked to apply the model in higher education institutions in Finland. I was then given the opportunity to collaborate with the Centre for Guidance Studies to facilitate the use of the model in the East and West Midlands<sup>1</sup> of England, in Scotland, and in Northern Ireland. As was the case with computer technology, it was apparent to me that the way in which organizations implemented change was a crucial element in the improvement of career resources and services. Having good computer applications and good service delivery models was important, but not enough.

## 2. Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is a goal, an attitude, and a process. As a *goal*, continuous improvement aims to create an organizational culture where managers and staff members seek opportunities to improve their career resources and services. As an *attitude*, continuous improvement is a cautiously optimistic expectation that the delivery of resources and services can be enhanced. Finally, as a *process*, continuous improvement is an ongoing cycle of evaluating current performance, identifying opportunities for enhancement, taking action, and then re-evaluating performance.

The success of continuous improvement is dependent upon managers and staff members knowing what to do (the content of change) and how to do it (the process of change). Knowing what to do requires a thorough knowledge of client<sup>2</sup> needs and potential resource and service delivery options to meet those needs. Knowing how to do it requires an understanding of how organizations work and how to manage the process of change.

The motivation for continuous improvement is both internal and external to the organizations who deliver career resources and services. Many managers and staff members are proud of the contribution they make toward the career development of young people and adults. They seek to improve the quality of their work so they can provide better help to the individuals they

<sup>1</sup> See Sampson, Palmer and Watts (1999) for a description of an early application of the differentiated service delivery model at Quality Careers Services in Coventry.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, "client" is used as a generic term referring to young people and adults using career resources and receiving career services. Depending on the setting where resources and services are provided, these individuals could be referred to as clients, students, customers, patrons, or employees.

are committed to serving. Policy makers who provide funding to the public and voluntary sector organizations are increasingly demanding evidence of continuous improvement as one of the conditions for receiving ongoing financial resources. Continuous improvement is essential for commercial service providers to remain competitive in the marketplace.

### 3. Factors Contributing to and Detracting from Continuous Improvement

One possible reaction to this analysis of factors that contribute to and detract from continuous improvement may be that they are just “common sense” for anyone who has worked in an organization. I could not agree more. In one sense I am just highlighting the obvious. If that is the case, is this paper necessary?

Unfortunately, it is a necessary topic for all of us, myself and my university included. I have observed organizations who have struggled with a process of change that resulted in staff frustration and questionable improvement in the quality of career resources and services. I am encouraged, however, because I have observed other organizations successfully manage change that resulted in tangible improvements in the provision of career resources and services. These organizations have successfully negotiated change in spite of many challenges. They anticipated problems that were then prevented. Unanticipated problems were often solved through the efforts of managers and staff.

My hope is that managers and staff members briefly review these factors as they create and implement continuous improvement plans for their organizations. I suggest that managers and staff members add important factors that I have overlooked and discard any factors that are not relevant to their situation. I also hope that managers and staff members briefly review these factors as they subsequently evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts. Reviewing this paper can reinforce what staff members already know about continuous improvement as well as add a few new insights.

The factors that contribute to and detract from continuous improvement are organizational culture, organizational leadership, strategic change, and implementing change.

### 4. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture provides the context for continuous improvement. The way in which problems are solved and the way in which managers and staff relate to each other are strongly influenced by the culture of the organization. Staff participation in

decision making, maintaining a client focus, openness to evaluation and accountability, accepting the ongoing nature of change, cultivating an attitude of cautious optimism, and using empowering language are important elements of organizational culture that contribute to or detract from continuous improvement.

#### *Staff Participation in Decision Making*

Staff participation in decision making is an essential aspect of successful organizational change (Axelrod, Axelrod, Jacobs & Beedon, 2006; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Scott-Ladd & Marshall, 2004; VanYperen, van den Berg & Willering, 1999; Witt, Andrews & Kacmar, 2000). Staff members are more likely to take risks and commit the effort necessary to change their behavior when they believe they have a chance to influence decisions. Stated simply, “People support what they help create” (Sampson, 2006, p. 52). Group participation in decision making contributes to the group cohesion needed when services are delivered by a team of staff members. Group input into decisions often results in better decisions because of the more diverse experience that is available to generate and evaluate options. The underlying message when staff members are given the opportunity to have meaningful input into decision making is that they are capable individuals and their contribution is important and valuable.

When staff members do not have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision making about potential change, the implication is that staff members are not likely to make a worthwhile contribution. Uninvolved staff members who feel devalued and alienated are more likely to resist change. Comments such as, “This will never work because...” or “Clients will like the old way much better because...” may mask thoughts such as, “If my opinion isn’t important, I’m not going to do anything to support this.” Lack of staff participation in decision making is a major contributor to staff resistance. Axelrod, Axelrod, Jacobs and Beedon (2006, p. 6) stated, “No change effort can succeed for long in the face of overt or covert resistance by those needing to be involved.”

It is important to acknowledge that some staff members have demonstrated that they do not make helpful contributions to group decision making, or actually detract from group discussions. In this case, managers need to exercise judgment about which staff members to involve at which stage of decision making. In large organizations it is impractical to involve all staff in decision making. In this case, rotating involvement of individuals representing various staff roles provides diverse input and sends the message that staff contributions to decision making is valuable. Finally, some decisions about the design and delivery of resources and services are made by a larger parent

organization because of economies of scale. However, staff input in decision making is still possible. Any opportunity for making decisions about the use of resources and services, no matter how small, should be exercised by staff members.

### *Maintaining a Client Focus*

Maintaining a client focus increases the likelihood that the design and delivery of career resources and services are congruent with the needs of various client groups. Staff members and clients may have divergent views about client needs and appropriate resources and services to meet those needs. For example, clients sometimes seek high wage jobs without adequate education or training, where staff members view education and training as an essential step in helping clients meet their financial goals. Staff members need to take this into account in helping clients develop realistic perceptions about their needs. Client input should obviously not be the only source of data about needs, since clients are sometimes unaware of all of their needs. Some clients perceive that their needs as overly simple or expect that staff will do things for them that they should actually do for themselves, such as write a CV.

It can be very helpful to ask clients to react to Web sites, brochures, and signs in a career resource room. The perceptions that clients have may reveal that they do not understand the professional jargon being used, such as employability skills, or they misperceive the meaning of specific terms, such as the difference between education and training. It can also be very helpful to ask clients about their perceptions of the type of people the organization serves and typical outcomes that clients can expect.

It can be particularly valuable to compare the input from novice and experienced clients. Novice clients who have not been previously served by the organization can be helpful in providing input based on the potential differences between their expectations and actual experiences in using resources and services. Experienced clients can provide valuable feedback on how new resources and services compare with previous resources and services (Sampson, 2006). Focus groups and individual interviews are particularly effective in obtaining this type of data from clients.

There are four points during the implementation process where client input is valuable. These four points occur during needs assessment, formative evaluation of resource and service delivery design, pilot testing, and summative evaluation (Sampson, 2006). Failure to maintain a client focus may result in the delivery of resources and services that only partially

meet the needs of clients. Clients generally react positively to requests for providing input.

In some cases, client input is required as part of receiving funding for delivering resources and services. The requirement is usually in the form of a client advisory group. Since this input may be required in the future, it is better to take a proactive rather than a reactive stance. Proactivity communicates a message to civil servants and policy makers that the importance of this activity is already understood and that the organization has a genuine interest in continuous improvement.

### *Openness to Evaluation and Accountability*

Continuous improvement is more likely when managers and staff members perceive evaluation as a proactive opportunity for enhancement rather than a frustrating and unnecessarily time-consuming task completed in response to some external requirement. Continuous improvement is guided by evaluation and reduces the time consumed by trial and error efforts. Given the increasing interest in evidence-based practice and external quality assurance reviews, evaluation is especially important. The work of Deirdre Hughes at the Centre for Guidance Studies provides a good example of how evidence-based practice can contribute to evaluation and accountability.

Formative evaluation provides an opportunity to examine career resources and services while they are being adapted, revised, or developed. Formative evaluation also occurs during the pilot testing phase of implementation. Evaluation data can then be used to make improvements in the content and delivery of resources and services. Summative evaluation examines the extent to which desired outcomes have been achieved (Sampson, 2006). Two types of comparisons can be used in this type of evaluation. In the first comparison, the nature of previous career resources and services can be contrasted with subsequent delivery of career resources and services. In the second comparison, the impact achieved by the organization can be contrasted with the impact achieved by other organizations delivering similar career resources and services. Data on the use of resources and services, as well as formative and summative evaluation data, help to establish the accountability necessary to maintain funding.

### *Accepting the Ongoing Nature of Change*

Accepting the ongoing nature of change is an aspect of organizational culture that supports continuous improvement. Career resources and services offered to clients evolve in response to changes in the needs of young people and adults, staff competencies, public

policy, and funding (Sampson, 2006). Change in organizations is always occurring. Accepting ongoing change as natural makes it easier to maintain momentum for continuous improvement. Sporadic improvement requires more time and resources to restart the implementation process for each project. It takes less energy to keep something moving than to start something moving.

### *Cultivating an Attitude of Cautious Optimism*

Cultivating an attitude of cautious optimism increases the chances that intended improvements will actually be successful. Staff members who are cautiously optimistic believe that change can lead to improved career resources and services, while also believing that change needs to be well planned and evaluated to avoid unrealistic expectations and preventable failure (Sampson, 2006). When a cautious attitude is accompanied by good critical thinking skills, staff members are less likely to use a resource or service developed elsewhere that has not been shown to be appropriate for the specific needs of the clients served by the organization. Optimism helps staff to remain motivated when problems are complex and not quickly solved. Managers have an important role to play in modeling and reinforcing cautious optimism.

### *Using Empowering Language*

The use of empowering language has a subtle but important influence on organizational change and continuous improvement. The language that managers, staff members, and consultants use is a direct reflection of their view of the process of change. Consider use of the terms “enhance,” “refine,” and “improve” versus “correct” and “fix.” “Enhance,” “refine,” and “improve” imply that a level of success has already been achieved, yet there is recognition that greater success is possible with additional effort. These terms recognize the effort and accomplishments of staff, while potentially contributing to further cohesion that is essential in a collaborative work environment. Using the terms “correct” and “fix” implies that an important element of a project has failed and that additional effort by staff is required to meet the previous standard of performance. The focus of these terms is on what’s wrong. As a result, some staff members may focus their energy on defending themselves and identify other factors they believe caused the failure. This reaction does not contribute to group cohesion and the teamwork required for “correcting” or “fixing” the problem. While it is true that some efforts are a failure and staff members are responsible, the terms “correct” and “fix” should be used judiciously and only when they are warranted. The term “continuous improvement” is congruent with “enhancement” and “refinement.”

## **5. Organizational Leadership**

Leadership is a crucial variable in determining whether change in an organization will be successful. Any effort to make changes in the delivery of career resources and services depends on clear, consistent, and effective organizational leadership. The most important source of leadership in promoting successful change is the senior manager (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Senior managers are most effective when they are positive and optimistic about the potential for change. Effective senior managers view change as more of an opportunity than a threat. They clearly communicate that change is important and valued (Holahan, Aronson, Jurkat & Schoorman, 2004). An ability to articulate a vision for improvement and to motivate managers and staff members are essential characteristics of a senior manager (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). The senior manager must understand the process for implementing change and create a plan for implementation that accounts for the strengths and limitations of the organization. Another important role for the senior managers is identifying and successfully dealing with staff resistance to change (Houston & Hogue, 1989). Finally, the senior manager needs to be able to evaluate the success of the implementation process and make appropriate adjustments as necessary.

## **6. Strategic Change**

Strategic change increases the chances that continuous improvements actually occur. Organizations can only cope with so much change at one time. Too much change overwhelms the capacity of managers and staff members to keep up with developments. Too much change may cause managers and staff members to cut corners in the implementation process and move so quickly that problems occur which could have been avoided by investing just a little more time in the process. Staff members then become aware of the poor quality of their work and that it is unlikely that any real improvement will occur. As discouragement with the implementation process grows, staff motivation to change declines. Managers and staff members who were initially excited and positive may become burned out by trying to do too much too fast. Organizations are like sponges in that there is only so much water the sponge can absorb. Organizations can only absorb so much change and after the saturation point, change becomes counterproductive.

Many improvements in career resources and services are possible. Managers and staff members need to determine which changes have the best chance of success in meeting priority client needs given the strengths and weaknesses within the organization and

the opportunities and threats that exist outside of the organization. Given the limited amount of staff time and financial resources that are typically available, it is crucial that priorities be set for change. To the extent that managers are able to exert control, organizations need fewer changes that are more effectively conceptualized, planned, and executed. I believe that organizations would be twice as effective in making changes if they attempted half as many changes. In this case, the adage, "Less is more" applies very well.

Using a strategy of strategic change is not always possible. The selection of the number and type of changes that the organization will undertake may not be under the control of managers and staff members. New public policy or reduced staff and financial resources may dictate that a number of required changes must occur all at once. In this case, it is essential to reduce implementation plans to the essentials and select resources and services that have already been designed. It may not be feasible to take the time to adapt resources and services from another source or to take time to revise and develop resources and services that do not currently exist.

## 7. Implementing Change

The process of change in continuous improvement is as important as the changes made. A resource or service that is better designed than what was previously available will not result in any improvement if an inadequate implementation process leads to poor use of the resource or service. For example, an improved career service Web site will be less helpful to clients if staff members do not understand how to use the site. The following thirteen elements of the implementation process can contribute to or detract from continuous improvement.

### *Creating and Using a Plan for Implementing Change*

Creating and then making consistent use of a flexible plan for implementing change substantially increases the chances that improvements in career resources and services actually occur. The chances of being overwhelmed with the process and details of change are decreased with the use of an implementation plan that is comprised of small steps completed over time. Following an implementation plan can help staff in making the best use of the limited time typically available for evaluation and planning. Use of an implementation plan allows staff members to invest time in proactively anticipating most problems, as opposed to encountering preventable problems and spending time in a reactive problem-solving mode. It is clearly a case of, "Pay me now or pay me later"

(Sampson, 2006). Using a proactive approach where problems can be avoided leads to less staff frustration and better staff motivation to continue working to implement change.

One example of an implementation plan for continuous improvement uses the following eight steps: 1) evaluating current career resources and services, 2) selecting, adapting, revising, and developing enhanced career resources and services, 3) integrating enhanced career resources and services with existing career resources and services, 4) training staff in pilot career centers and schools, 5) conducting pilot testing, 6) training staff in all career centers and schools, 7) delivering career resources and services, and 8) conducting ongoing evaluation and establishing accountability (Sampson, 2006). I am using organization-specific versions of this model in my current continuous improvement projects. Figure 1 on page 7 depicts the sequence of steps in the model.

### *Evaluating Existing Career Resources and Services Prior to Implementing Change*

Evaluation of existing resources and services is the foundation for continuous improvement. It is difficult to know where you are going if you do not know where you are starting from. Knowing what works and does not work with what kind of client is essential in knowing where to start in making improvements. The key to successful evaluation is institutionalization. As long as evaluation is an afterthought completed sporadically in reaction to an external demand, little useful data is available to guide staff in improving career resources and services. Without good evaluation data, it is difficult to avoid repeating old mistakes and very difficult to take advantage of opportunities that require a quick proposal to respond to the availability of new financial resources.

### *Examining Best Practice as Part of Designing Improved Career Resources and Services*

Examining best practice is an important aspect of designing improved career resources and services. Arranging staff visits to other organizations who have developed effective services provides a more advanced starting point for change. Examining evidence-based practice may be particularly helpful. There is no need to reinvent the wheel every time we want to design a car. Observing best practices may also be motivational to staff members who achieve a better understanding of the potential benefits of specific changes. On the other hand, managers and staff members may have believed that specific resources and services would be effective, but when seen in another organization it becomes quickly apparent the approach would not be effective in their organization. This realization could save

considerable time and money that could be more effectively spent elsewhere.

### *Conducting Formative Evaluation of Potentially Improved Resources and Services*

Conducting formative evaluation of career resources and services increases the chances that the intended improvements actually occur. When an implementation schedule is short, managers and staff members may decide that it is not feasible to conduct a formative evaluation during the adaptation, revision, or development of resources and services. However, if problems become evident during pilot testing it may take more time to correct a problem at this stage. Worse yet, the lack of time available may result in proceeding with the use of resources and services that are less effective than could have been the case. Formative evaluation need not be complicated or time consuming. Observations, interviews, and focus groups can be used quickly and require only moderate skills in evaluation. When formative evaluation of resources and services is omitted, continuous improvement is less likely to occur.

### *Integrating Improved Career Resources and Services with Existing Resources and Services*

Improved career resources and services work best when they complement existing career resources and services. Integration is concerned with the effective fit between existing and enhanced resources and services (Sampson, 2006). The ineffectiveness of some intended improvements occurs because managers and staff members did not ensure that new resources and services were integrated with existing resources and services. After examining potential integration, some resources and services can be eliminated, saving money that can be used in other ways. Some resources and services will need to be altered so that the new and the old work together. If integration does not occur, clients may become confused and ask, "Why am I doing this? Haven't I done this before?" They may also say, "This is confusing. The other information I read is different from this information. Now what should I do?" A frightening prospect is that clients assume that it is their fault that they are confused, conclude that they are not capable of being helped, and quietly leave. Statements by staff such as, "Why are we taking so much time with this? Let's just go on and do it and be done with it" often result in integration problems that could have been avoided.

Traditions provide much needed stability in times of change; they help staff to have pride in the continuity of their work, and make it easier to induct new staff members into the organization. However, these same traditions can result in keeping popular resources and services that duplicate what's new.

### *Pilot Testing Career Resources and Services Before Full Implementation*

Pilot testing career resources and services before full implementation provides the best opportunity to improve preliminary designs. Here again, preventable problems may be avoided by taking the time to make reasonably sure that improved resources and services actually work. Evidence of improved effectiveness that is provided by pilot testing may help some resistant staff to be more confident that they can be competent in delivering new resources and services.

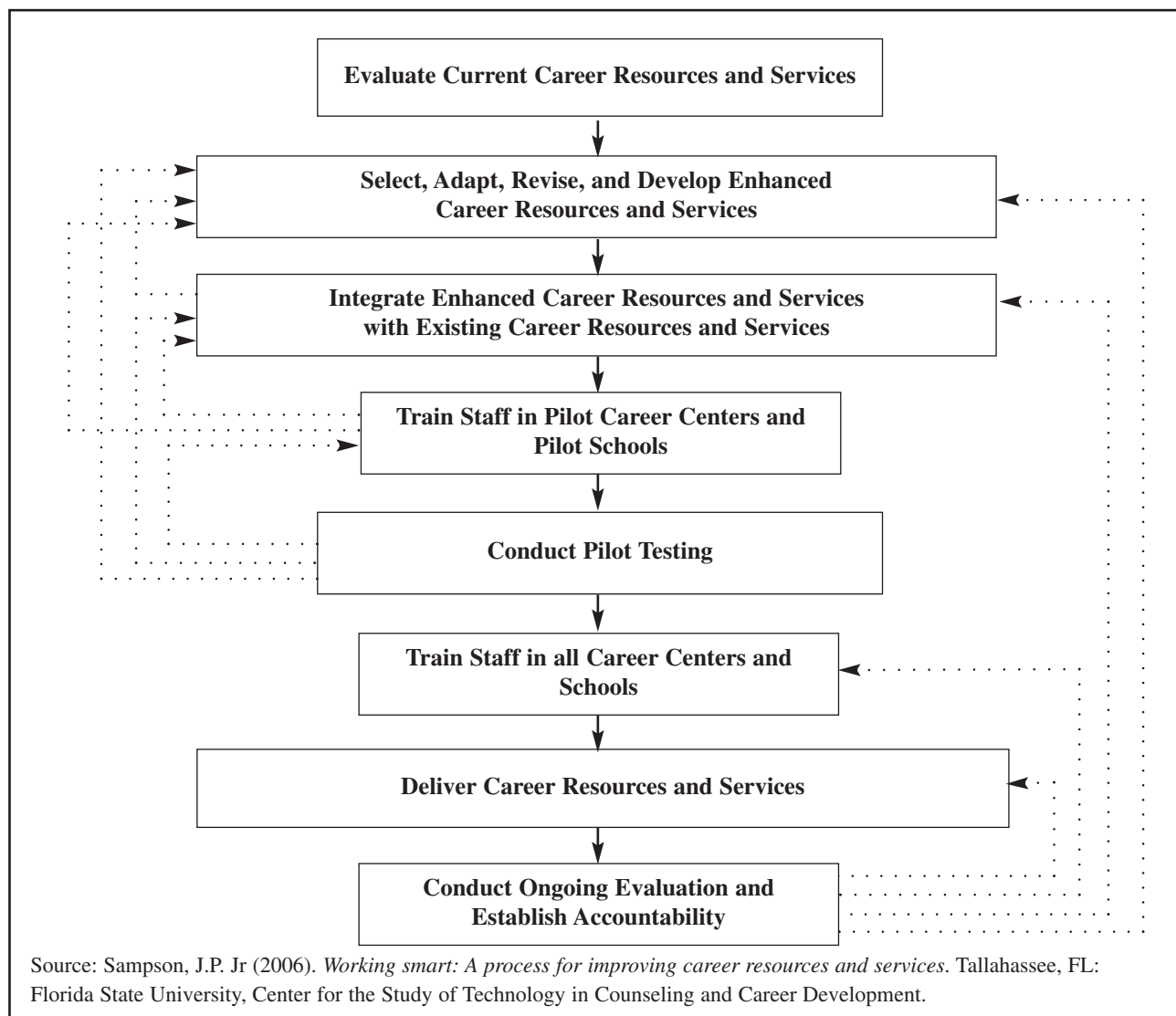
### *Providing Ongoing Staff Training*

Providing ongoing staff training is essential. Simply stated, continuous improvement cannot occur without ongoing and effective staff training. Client needs are continuing to evolve as communities become more diverse. New configurations of collaborating partners in service delivery are emerging. Developments in the use of information and communication technology continue at a rapid pace. These are only a few examples of changes that are occurring. Organizations who do not allocate time and financial resources to help their managers and staff maintain and update their skills to deal with these changes will not be able to continue delivering quality career resources and services. In an environment where funding for service delivery is increasingly dependent on performance, organizations who fail to adequately train their staff will likely become less and less able to secure funding.

### *Having Realistic Expectations for the Rate of Change*

Having realistic expectations for the speed at which improvements can be made in the design and use of career resources and services reduces the risk of cutting corners to meet an unreasonable schedule. The speed of change needs to be fast enough to maintain momentum, yet not so fast that it creates unrealistic expectations which may lead to staff frustration (Sampson, 2006). Many managers and staff members become frustrated when a rushed time schedule means that they were not able to perform reasonably close to their level of capability. Managers and staff then remark, "Why go through all of this effort when there isn't time to do it right? We're not doing things any better; we're just doing things differently." Time delays inevitably arise, mostly unforeseen. It is better to set a time range for implementing change rather than a fixed date. Progress can then be regularly evaluated and changes in the schedule made as necessary. However, it is important to acknowledge that some time schedules are imposed externally and there is little opportunity to establish a realistic schedule (Sampson, 2006). If this is the case, managers and staff need to implement only essential changes and follow good implementation practice as best as possible.

**Figure 1: Complete Eight-Step Implementation Model for Improved Career Resources and Services Showing All Options for Repeating Steps as Needed**



**Providing Adequate Staff Resources for Implementing Change**

Successful organizational change is dependent on the availability of adequate staff and financial resources. There are direct costs associated with organizational change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Improvement requires investment. The most important resource for successful change is staff time. Some staff activities are time consuming, such as assessing needs, identifying and reviewing examples of best practice, creating, selecting, adapting, revising, and developing resources and services, integrating new and old services, pilot testing, designing and delivering staff training, and evaluating success. Staff directly involved in continuous improvement need to have adequate and regularly scheduled time that is dedicated to implementing change (Sampson, 2006). Making continuous improvement a priority by dedicating adequate staff time may result in a temporary reduction

of the number of clients served. Civil servants and policy makers need to be aware of this and either temporarily add resources when major changes are being made or temporarily relax client service targets. Managers also need dedicated time to supervise the change process in order to maintain momentum and facilitate problem solving when inevitable difficulties arise. Fitting time for resource and service improvement in between other tasks or after the “regular” work is done leads to inconsistent progress and less efficient use of time. It also implies that improving resources and services is not really a priority. Other staff members easily perceive this de facto lack of commitment and exert less effort in implementing change. There are managers and staff members who are open to change, understand client needs, understand effective organizational change, and are willing to work hard and take risks, but they need adequate support to be effective. Adopting a strategic change strategy can

help by more realistically matching available staff time with high priority improvements.

### *Continuity of Managers and Staff Members*

Having reasonable continuity of managers and staff members helps an organization to maintain the momentum necessary to complete change. Continuity is especially important when attempting a major change that is complex and occurs over a longer period. Since the senior manager plays such a pivotal role in the success of any organizational change, the ongoing leadership provided by this individual is essential. If there is a change in senior management, one of the tasks of the new manager is to review the goals for change and the progress that has occurred. If the manager is committed to continuing with an implementation plan, this message needs to be clearly communicated to managers and staff to maintain the motivation for change and to avoid a significant loss of momentum.

A new manager also needs to affirm to the staff members they supervise that they are committed to the plans for change, if this is in fact the case. Staff members are more likely to be motivated to work towards change if they believe their manager is similarly motivated to change and will be available to provide adequate support and supervision.

Staff members actually make the changes that are identified in the implementation plan. It is important for staff members to note the progress they have made in completing their part of the implementation plan. This brief documentation makes it easier for staff to assume new responsibilities. It is especially important to maintain continuity in staff members who are pilot testing new resources and services.

### *Marketing Improved Career Resources and Services*

Marketing is an important element of improving career resources and services. Occasionally, the number of clients using new career resources and services do not meet expectations, especially when a resource or service is offered for the first time. Staff members have said, "I don't understand why clients are not using this great service. I know they really need this kind of help." Clients cannot use resources and services that they do not know exist. Marketing efforts need to be included in any implementation plan and adequate staff time and financial resources need to be allocated to this task. Often the time and money available are all consumed in creating the improved resources and services, and little, if any, time and money are available for marketing. The danger is that a quick and potentially erroneous decision is made that a resource or service is really not needed since it is not being heavily used, when in reality the need does exist but clients were not aware that help was available. Policy

makers are also important consumers of marketing efforts. As decisions are made about future funding, policy makers need to remain aware of the resources and services that are already being delivered to the public.

### *Proactively Addressing Staff Resistance to Change*

Proactively addressing staff resistance to change facilitates program improvement. Staff resistance to change is both good and bad. Some staff members question change for good reasons. Some changes, no matter how well intentioned, may lead to a reduction in the quality of career resources and services. Care needs to be taken that good practice is not replaced by new resources and services that are inferior to what was available previously. Simply because something is new does not mean that it is an improvement (Sampson, 2006). Organizations need staff members who are good critical thinkers and who are willing to ask difficult questions. Conducting a good needs assessment and using formative evaluation of new resources and services as they are implemented provides an opportunity for good critical thinking before final resources are committed to a project that is not likely to be effective. Managers that balance leading and listening are less likely to encounter resistance to change.

There is a difference, however, between staff who sincerely want to help the organization avoid inappropriate change and staff who have personal reasons for resisting change that is actually good for the organization. Some staff members have said, "We can handle this new program just like we have dealt with all the rest. We just use the new words instead of the words from the old program and we can keep doing what we have always been doing. Nothing really needs to change." If this attitude prevails, it is an indicator that supervision and staff evaluation, as well as program evaluation, are not working effectively.

Managers need to be proactive in identifying and dealing with staff resistance as early as possible during the implementation process. As was stated earlier, a lack of staff participation in decision making contributes to staff resistance to change. Providing resistant staff with the opportunity to voice their concerns provides a chance to identify and potentially resolve problems before significant difficulties occur in the implementation process.

It is especially important for managers to communicate regularly with staff who are not directly involved in designing resources and services. Staff become understandably anxious when they hear that changes will be made but have little idea of the impact that these changes will have on their specific jobs. We fear what we do not understand and resistance to change is one way of

responding to this fear. Communication with staff does not have to be burdensome. Brief but regular e-mails will suffice as long as a staff member involved in the design process is available to answer questions.

Ongoing training can minimize staff resistance to change. Most staff members genuinely dislike perceiving themselves as not being competent in their work. It is easy for staff members to become anxious that they will not be able to answer a question from a client about the use of a new career resource or service. Effective training can lessen anxiety and may reduce resistance to change as staff members become more confident that they can effectively use the new resources and services that are available (Sampson, 2006). Training is particularly important in situations where staff work as a team in serving clients (Sampson, Palmer & Watts, 1999). Similar to working with clients, anxiety can increase when staff members are concerned that they will not be able to effectively use resources when collaborating with a fellow staff member.

Good communication with staff members is one of the first causalities of change that is moving faster than the coping ability of staff members. Staff members need to clearly be aware of how their job might change, have a chance to share their opinion about the change, and be confident that training will be available to help them remain competent in their work.

### *Continuous Improvement of Implementation*

Continuous improvement applies to implementation just as much as it applies to improvements in career resources and services. Implementing change is not an easy process. Some organizations are more successful with implementing change than others. One of the reasons they are more successful is that they are willing to take the time to evaluate the process of implementing new resources and services. Managers and staff members can identify opportunities for improvement, such as using more case studies and practical examples in training. Managers and staff members responsible for elements of the implementation process need to be confident and secure enough in their work to identify tasks that can be improved. Senior managers need to articulate to staff that how things change is as important as what things change.

## **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe that continuous improvement is difficult, especially when we have limited resources to serve increasing numbers of young people and adults who have more diverse needs. I also believe that continuous improvement is difficult because the process of organizational change is influenced by numerous and

often conflicting factors. While we can control some of these organizational factors, other variables are beyond our control.

I am, however, cautiously optimistic that continuous improvement is possible in the delivery of career resources and services. I believe that there are more managers and staff who want to improve than those who do not. I believe that managers and staff have the expertise necessary to improve the quality of the resources and services they provide to clients. I also believe that financial resources are available, even when “there is no money left in the budget.” Civil servants and policy makers who want to have a role in “making things happen” can sometimes find money when they believe that an organization has motivated managers and staff who have a plan for change that is likely to result in tangible improvement.

When the change process becomes difficult, remember why you chose to work in this field. I will likely never forget the three young men I talked with in a small client focus group in the Careers Scotland office in Livingston. One young man was returning from military service to look for a job in the community where he was born, but had little idea about how to find work or use the transferable skills he had gained in the military. The second young man was confused and anxious after being laid off from his job with the major employer in the area who was moving their operation elsewhere. This was not supposed to have happened to him. He had worked hard and done all he had been asked to do. He had little idea what to do to replace his job. The third young man was sixteen years old and had just left school with no plans for training or employment. He was so overwhelmed; he did not even know what he needed. When I get discouraged, I try to remember these young men. I try to see their faces and hear their voices. It reminds me that continuous improvement is about people and not programs, and no matter how difficult the process of change is, it is worth the effort.

Even in the best circumstances, change is difficult. Yet many organizations are successful in the continuous improvement of their career resources and services. To make continuous improvement a success, believe in and listen to managers and staff, make improvement an ongoing effort, be proactive instead of reactive, change less but change more effectively, and most important – put the client first in making any change. I am immensely proud of many of the managers and staff members I have worked with as a consultant. Their hard work, cautious optimism, and skill in managing change has led to improved educational, training, and employment opportunities for the many young people and adults who are seeking a better life.

### References

- Axelrod, R.H., Axelrod, E., Jacobs, R.W. & Beedon, J. (2006). Beat the odds and succeed in organizational change. *Consulting to Management*, 17(2), 6-9.
- Carr, H.H. & Hogue, J.T. (1989). It takes a champion. *Journal of Systems Management*, 40(8), 15-17.
- Fernandez, S. & Rainey, H.G. (2006). Managing successful organizational change in the public sector. *Public Administration Review*, 66, 168-176.
- Holahan, P.J., Aronson, Z.H., Jurkat, M.P. & Schoorman, F.D. (2004). Implementing computer technology: A multiorganizational test of Klein and Sorra's model. *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management*, 21, 31-50.
- Peterson, G.W., Sampson, J.P. Jr, Lenz, J.G. & Reardon, R.C. (2002). Becoming career problem solvers and decision makers: A cognitive information processing approach. In Brown, D. (ed.), *Career choice and development*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 312-369. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sampson, J.P. Jr (2006). *Working smart: A process for improving career resources and services*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling and Career Development.
- Sampson, J.P. Jr, Palmer, M. & Watts, A.G. (1999). *Who Needs Guidance?* Occasional Paper. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby. Retrieved June 13 2006 from <http://www.derby.ac.uk/Cegs/publications/guidance.PDF>
- Scott-Ladd, B. & Marshall, V. (2004). Participation in decision making: A matter of context? *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal*, 25, 646-662.
- VanYperen, N.W., van den Berg, A.E. & Willering, M.C. (1999). Towards a better understanding of the link between participation in decision-making and organizational citizenship: A multilevel analysis. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 72, 377-392.
- Witt, L.A., Andrews, M.C. & Kacmar, K.M. (2000). The role of participation in decision-making in the organizational politics-job satisfaction relationship. *Human Relations*, 53, 341-358.