

FIVE THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT HOW TO BE A HAPPY MENTAL HEALTH ADMINISTRATOR

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Three long-time administrators of a large, urban community mental health program are not only surviving, but thriving, despite the overwhelming challenges of their daily work. Through a blend of written narrative and conversation, these administrators describe five strategies they have used to enhance and enjoy their administrative work.

Administrative work in community mental health, much like administrative work in most human service settings, can pose many fist-clenching, stomach-rolling challenges on a daily basis. Three administrators in a Cleveland-based behavioral health program have developed simple, low-tech strategies for managing ongoing challenges while maintaining a genuine enjoyment of their work. Handling situations ranging from staff billing irregularities, to taking over an 800 client site in two weeks with no additional staff, Jim Penman, Mary McCaffery-Hull and Patrick Milloy have managed to look forward to going to work, at least on most days. In the world of beleaguered administrators, that is no small accomplishment!

Jim, Mary, and Patrick are respectively, the vice president, director and associate director of the behavioral health (BH) program for the Center for Families and Children (CFC). CFC is a private, non-profit human service agency with an annual operating budget of \$18M, and an array of human service programs ranging from direct service programs such as outpatient behavioral health, to system reform and advocacy work. BH is the largest program at CFC, serving over 5,000 clients annually, with an annual budget of \$8.5M, 122 staff and five program sites. These program sites range from inner ring suburbs of Cleveland, to some of Cleveland's

most socio-economically stressed and crime-ridden areas.

What follows are elaborations on five of the most significant understandings these three administrators have developed through their work together, described in part through excerpts from a discussion between Patrick, Mary and myself, Janet. (Because Jim is a particularly beleaguered administrator, he unfortunately was unable to attend the meeting in which the conversation took place, but we talked about him so much it felt like he was there!) Something as simple as office location transformed their ability to communicate and collaborate, divvy up tasks in a strengths-based way, and continually learn from each other. Working together in close quarters necessitated shedding ego needs to the extent possible; this helped enable them to embrace the role of "professional problem solver," which is a role not known for eliciting positive feedback. Jim, Mary, and Patrick built upon these five simple, inter-related ideas to create a dynamic, ever-evolving leadership team that is both highly effective *and* fun.

#1 – Location, Location, Location: Where You Sit is Important!

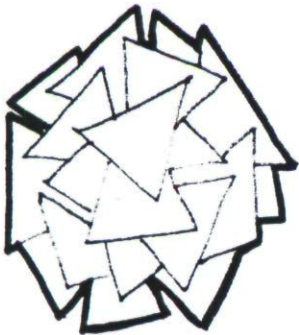
From spacious offices in a trendy downtown district, to a smallish shared office space at a program site in a working class Cleveland neighborhood, Jim, Mary, and Patrick experienced the significance of

physical location in their functioning as a team. They began working together as a behavioral health leadership team in a large historic office building in an up-and-coming area of downtown Cleveland. Jim was the head administrator for BH, and promoted Mary and Patrick from supervisory to managerial roles. At this point in CFC's history, the administrative office (referred to as AO) was geographically separate from all of the other program sites. (Plans were unfolding to integrate administration with program staff; this change has since successfully occurred.) This office building was a strictly administrative building, housing administrators and support staff for behavioral health and the other programs of the Center for Families and Children (CFC). Within this AO, Jim, Mary and Patrick's offices initially were on the same floor, but not the same wing. This newly formed team of administrators quickly discovered that workloads and the quality and immediacy of communications seemed directly correlated with the distance between each other's offices.

Mary: *The three of us were on the same floor, but Jim and I were next to each other, and Patrick was way the hell down the hall.*

Patrick: *I was in the other corner of the building.*

Mary: *Yes, and so, Jim would yell - at this point Patrick and I are peers - and Jim, he would yell, "Hey Mary blah blah blah," and I would say, walk down to Patrick, call Patrick, I am buried here, what the hell is Patrick doing down the hall, you never go to him for things because you can yell, "Hey Mary"... I started thinking that we needed to be together in a room.*



Patrick: *I felt really detached, and I complained about it... I felt like I was too far away, I wanted to be part of what we were doing, but the location of our offices did not readily allow for it.*

They discovered that their team structure mimicked the physical structure of their office locations, despite their best efforts to function otherwise; even while using e-mail and phones to simulate proximity, they found there was no substitute for being able to turn one's head and simply speak out. After numerous discussions, and a failed attempt to move Patrick to a closer office (there was very limited office availability, and the closer office was given to another program administrator), they decided to take drastic measures: all three administrators packed their things and relocated to a single office located at a behavioral health site office on the west side of Cleveland. (While this move was mainly driven by a need to increase proximity between the team members, it was not unnoticed by direct service staff. Those direct service staff who were sharing offices due to a shortage of office space quickly developed a new respect for their leadership team, who wasn't asking the direct service staff to do anything they weren't willing to try themselves).

#2 – Eavesdropping Can Be a Good Thing

Patrick: *...talk about extremes...we went from each having our own large office, to being in one same small space together...and it became so incredibly easy to stay informed about each other's projects, and to get real time updates...it was practically impossible not to...*

Simply by being in the same room, the teammates couldn't help but half-listen to each other's phone calls and conversations much

of the time, and found themselves being at least somewhat apprised of what each other was working on at any given moment. Consultations and trouble-shooting with each other occurred on the spot, in real time. The need to provide background explanations for specific situations was greatly reduced.

For example, Mary typically takes the lead in monitoring staff productivity (the hours billed by each mental health clinician). Mary had a series of phone calls with a supervisor, human resource staff, information technology staff, and fiscal staff about a clinician whose billings had abruptly and drastically increased. Prior to this increase, the clinician had not been achieving the hours of billable direct service expected for the position, and had been prompted to do so by supervisory staff. A client of this staff person then called in crisis, during a time when the staff was supposed to be on a home visit with this client. Through many phone conversations, Mary investigated, retrieving and comparing online schedules, sign-in and sign-out sheets, progress notes, and actual billings. Although she hoped to find an alternative explanation, Mary unfortunately discovered that this clinician was submitting fabricated billings. Simply by 'eavesdropping,' Jim and Patrick were able to stay generally abreast on developments in an emergent and complex managerial situation that necessitated immediate action. Mary was able to get immediate consultation as needed with Jim and Patrick in real time, simply by putting the staff she was talking with on hold and turning around in her chair. In between brief conversations and updates with Mary, Jim, and Patrick were able to proceed with other work at their desks, rather than having the down time that would occur if they were waiting around in Mary's office.

Personnel issues can be particularly draining, as administrators are limited in the amount of information they can disclose to the direct service clinicians about why their

direct service peer was disciplined or fired. Rumors can run rampant, and administrating can be a lonely task indeed. In addition to speeding up the lines of communication and creating a milieu of collaboration, the simple act of sharing an office also allowed for in-the-moment moral support from people who truly understood the trials and tribulations of one's work.

Patrick: *...the hardest personnel time for me was about two years ago, and entailed dealing with a bunch of personnel issues with a bunch of people at the same time...*

Patrick, in his lead role with human resource issues, found himself having to deal with the staff of a behavioral health program site (that was recently taken over by CFC after the original agency closed down), at which documentation was not in compliance. Not surprisingly, this behavioral health site failed their Medicaid audit. The staff responses to the results of this audit were generally uninterested and unapologetic, and disciplinary action en masse – including suspensions and terminations - was reluctantly undertaken.

Patrick: *If I was in my own little office and bummed... well, that would have been especially tough, because I would have been alone; I might've been able to get up and be able to walk over to the other end of the building to find someone who understands... but maybe not. Having two co-workers right there who really got it and understood ... that was such a support for me... they'd heard it all as it went down, and they knew exactly where I was at...*

#3 – Being a Jack of All Trades Does Not Preclude Mastering Some

In addition to better enabling them to support each other, the shared office of Jim,

Mary, and Patrick is an open-door destination for many (including me) who are in need of support and guidance. I currently work part-time as a clinician in CFC's behavioral health program. I recently triaged a potentially lethal situation with a client who was contemplating a homicide/suicide course of action, and I needed to consult. I trotted to Jim, Mary and Patrick's office seeking emergency consultation, without giving a thought as to which of them would be there, odds were that one of them would be, and that was all I needed.

It only struck me as odd later that I had absolutely no preference; that I had the utmost confidence in each of them when it came to such matters. From conversations with other staff over the years, I know I am not alone in this "JMP" mentality. In many areas of general program management, Jim, Mary and Patrick function and are often viewed as interchangeable by BH staff, as well as staff from other departments. However, in talking with Jim, Mary and Patrick about how they organize their work, it was abundantly clear that they have also eked out specializations in terms of the kinds of programmatic issues they manage on an ongoing basis. In terms of day-to-day program administration, they are able to seamlessly integrate their ever-evolving specialist and generalist functions.

The areas of specialization developed by Jim, Mary and Patrick are largely driven by each of their unique strengths and aptitudes, rather than the arbitrary delegating of tasks that initially occurred when they worked in separate offices. While office-sharing is not for everyone, yet another positive by-product of such management model for this team was the opportunity to learn each other's strengths and weaknesses through ongoing proximity, and to carve out mutually agreeable and distinct areas of responsibility for each team member accordingly.

With her logical, detail-oriented mind, Mary quickly and naturally assumed the role of 'data-hound' for the team:

Mary: *Numbers and reporting and the integration of data to make program suggestions is the way my mind works. I don't have to work hard to think that way, it just sort of happens. So, a lot of the number crunching and report generating and counting numbers, daily hours of productivity, those kinds of things have fallen naturally into my arena.*

Patrick's gentle spirit and natural mediating abilities enabled him to skillfully handle sticky labor issues, which has since evolved into a more big-picture human resource function for the behavioral health program:

Patrick: *...that kind of number crunching thinking doesn't come as easily for me. I developed toward handling personnel issues. I started initially with grievances and disciplines and employee problems as they came up...I then gradually started learning and doing more in the broader areas of recruitment and retention, working in close collaboration with CFC's human resource department. And I like that kind of stuff.*

Some of us are obviously left-brained, and others more right-brained in our aptitudes and thinking. However, with Jim, this is not so. With Jim, there appears to be just one big brain, and a multitude of aptitudes so infinite it is anyone's guess. Because he has the capacity to converge, diverge, synthesize, strategize and create uncannily well, Mary and Patrick refer to Jim as "the mutant," and concur that Jim takes the lead in strategic, big-picture programmatic issues:

Mary: *Jim has the best business head of the three of us by far...he can think any given scenario through, he can go to the end result of any given potential action, in terms of what it will likely mean for us programmatically and financially, in five days and five months and in five years. That for me is like swimming in molasses.*

Patrick: *In effect he (Jim) is always playing chess, he is always thinking a move ahead, and he is really good at it. He is one of the brightest people I have ever known. He can keep so much in his mind at one time...watching his mind work amazes me...*

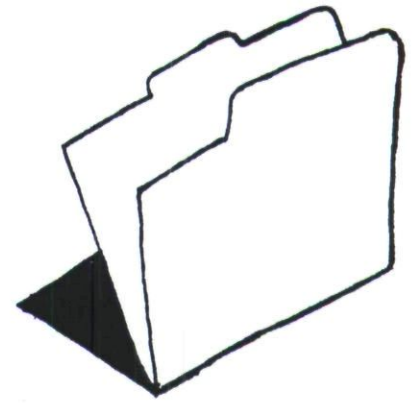
Mary: *We call him "the mutant" in that capacity. He really is amazing, truly amazing... Jim has always been, by longevity, by title, by everything, a rung above us. We have never been on the same rung of the ladder – Jim refuses to think hierarchical ladder terms - but it's true. So, ultimately when the shit comes down it would come down to him; even as we try to be interchangeable, the ultimate responsibility for everything has been Jim's, which is why it is JMP. So, I am happy to know that absolutely every time anybody would need to know where we were with progress notes, I am going to have the answer. I cannot expect myself also to know exactly where we are at any given moment in the hiring process for staff at each of our five sites, and Patrick would know that. Jim needs to have the answer to both of those questions every time he asks, along with answers to multitude of other questions...to give the one big head of Jim, all of that information, our work had to fall out so.... Everybody cannot know everything, though we try, and I still think that's the goal, and that's part of why we were literally in the same office space.*

#4 – Be a Teaching and Learning Community, Not a Dictator State

Whenever I consult with JMP, it is inevitably a learning experience for me. I do not await orders, but rather, find myself participating in JMPs' collaborative process in a way that often brings to mind bell hook's idea of a "teaching community" (1994, p. 129). hooks (1994, p. 130) explains such a community as "...individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection and shared concern... to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin." JMPs' commitment to process and ongoing learning, both for themselves and those they supervise, seems to permeate every aspect of their daily operations work.

Patrick: *We have never operated in a way in which Jim says 'do this' and we had to follow. There was a time for me, I used to think, WWJD - what would Jim do - and I do not do that anymore...*

Mary: *It would have been functional for Jim to just tell us what to do because of both his capacities and his experiences, just who he is, and we could have been sort of minions. You know: "You go and do this and it should come out that way," and "You go do that and it should come out that way." He (Jim) could have had a team where he was the person telling his team mates or his underlings what to do, and we could have functioned because he would have been entirely capable, we were entirely capable of being told what to do and doing it. But Jim absolutely would not do that, would not, will not, does not, that is not who he is, that is not how he wants*



to do it. We have said all along that the way we have worked initially was way less efficient in time management than it could have been if he told us what to do. To talk about something for an hour and then go off and do our three parts of it is less efficient than one person saying: "You do this part, you do this part, I will do that part, and we will meet at the end." That takes five minutes, instead of the hour discussing how we were going to do it. Jim's belief has been that in discussing something for an hour instead of a five minute "You go do this, you go do that," will eventually, over time - and this is exactly what has happened - create the sort of shared mind set. Not the same, but similar. All of those millions of hours of conversation have taken our differences - our differences are always around the table - and given us a common philosophy, a common view of our work.

Patrick: *There are times where someone will send an e-mail to the three of us, to the JMP thing (an e-mail grouping used by many at CFC), asking a question about the program, such as: "Do you think it would be okay to allow for overtime in this situation?" and I might answer that and many, many times find that Mary answers it and/or Jim, in more or less or the same way. That is what Jim has wanted. People in other departments have commented on it - they'll say to me: "That is the same thing Jim or Mary said." That is what we strive for. Not to think alike, but to arrive at a common conclusion that works.*

Operating from a mutually agreed upon terrain of commonality and connection mapped through hours of dialogue (hooks, 1994) allows JMP to collaboratively generate a range of potential options, solutions and conclusions for any given management

situation, rather than limiting Mary and Patrick to a WWJD (What Would Jim Do) dichotomous thinking mindset. Jim has championed this notion of a continuum of 'right' answers, rather than *the* right answer for a given situation, throughout the history of the team.

Mary: *"Generally westward" is an old saying that has been Jim's since I have known him to be in administration. He means we are moving things generally westward - whether you go through Chicago or whether you go through Indianapolis, you are still going generally westward from here (Ohio).*

Patrick: *It is an interesting concept...to move generally westward... like there is a whole continuum of the right decision, so to speak. Jim often says, "I don't know the right answer; I would do it this way, but the supervisor wanted it to be put that way. There is a whole continuum of the right thing to do."*

Mary: *Thinking like that has been a struggle for me, because I am the cartographer in life. I am precise and a planner. Embracing this has been a hugely expanding experience for me...*

The notion of 'generally westward' became JMP's mantra and saving grace during perhaps the greatest challenge of their career. Another large mental health center on the east side of Cleveland abruptly closed down, and 800 clients were left without services. CFC was again asked to step in and take over this site, but this time without any additional staff in place, and within a two week timeframe. Patrick led the effort, and spent much of his time triaging and organizing assessments and psychiatric evaluations for a flood of walk-in clients who were in desperate need of medications. Extensive text-book

assessments and evaluations that took two hours to complete were a luxury that simply couldn't be afforded; given the sheer numbers of those in dire need of immediate services, the focus had to be on getting basic assessments and evaluations done as quickly as humanly possible.

Patrick: *In that kind of a situation – it was client chaos, medication chaos, you-name-it-chaos – I had to keep in mind the big picture of what we are trying to do there...and I thought, "Okay, we cannot build a mansion with marble staircases and everything, so lets get this rickety piece of wood and build. Let's take this and build a little wooden staircase. It's okay, what we are trying to do is get to a functional place, just baseline functional, where we can see clients, give them medication, get them involved in our system, do assessments and do not worry if it does not look good, because it cannot." That was okay with me, because it had to be...*

Mary: *...it was so important, the ability to tolerate just being there (in the chaotic situation), and the ability to define one's self as worthy or competent, even as the chaos persisted...what I was thinking was, "Well this is chaos, but maybe if we can get a little loosely organized chaos, we are doing a good job here."*

#5 – Leave Your Ego at Home

Thinking in continuums rather than dichotomies can be particularly tedious for those who are ego-driven and feel a need to be right. Egos can also take up a lot of space in a shared office situation. While JMP experienced a multitude of benefits through the simple act of trying out an office share, Mary and Patrick stress that this type of set-up is not for everyone. Those who are highly competitive rather than collaborative could find themselves in dire straits in such an office set-

up, or in the day-to-day tasks of administration.

Mary: *I think we all, the three of us, have the ego strength to allow the boundaries to be completely blurred and have trust in each other and in ourselves, so that I am okay if you (looks at Patrick) think I am full of shit, I might be full of shit, and I trust your perspective. Working this intimately as a team is not for everybody, or for the weak of ego strength, or for the blustering kind of ego.*

Patrick: *You know what, that is a really important point because that is another way that we have been able to do this and be an interchangeable team. Nobody here has the bigger ego, to where any of us are striving to be in charge, or to be the best...that does not work in this kind of team. Our personalities work well in that respect; I think we are all naturally a little more self-effacing rather than self-promoting.*

In considering the role of the ego in administrative work outside of the office, Patrick and Mary emphasize that administration is not a job where one is always going to be liked

Patrick: *It's important to have your supports in place, and not to take yourself too seriously, know that people are acting out their intrapersonal issues at work and you are an authority figure/parent, and sometimes there is nothing you can do when people tap into their own issues sometimes...nothing you can do except try to be respectful and fair...and you better not need to be liked...*

Mary: *I echo what Patrick said...And administration, to me, the real title, is professional problem solving, and I do not*



think I knew this in the beginning. I do not think I knew what administration was.

Patrick: *No, I did not either.*

Mary: *... with this job, what I have learned is the rewards are intrinsic for me and the (tangible) rewards of the program do not get to me. That is not what is on my desk. What is on my desk are the problems - that is our job - and so if a person is hoping for a fair amount of feedback...*

Patrick: *... 'feel-good' feedback...*

Mary: *...success-related feedback, you can forget about it. What you need to have is desire and energy for solving one problem after another, after another, after another, after another, because that is what administrators do. People do not call us with the good stuff, they call us when the shit hits the fan - with this person, with this client, with a complaint, the list is endless - but that is our job and that is the job of administration...that is what we are here for...There is this saying I have seen: "It is hard to remember you were sent in to clean up the swamp when you are up to your ass in alligators." It takes a certain kind of person to go in to clean up the swamp, knowing full well it is not going to get cleaned out today, next week, or for quite a while, because the alligators are snapping at one's ass, and to be able to say, "I am going to stay here in it...I am going to clean up the swamp, because that is what I went in to do...."*

Conclusion

Jim has recently moved out of the shared office due to structural changes at CFC pertaining to his role as vice president of BH. He is now somewhat removed from the daily operations of BH, and functions predominantly in a strategic planning capacity.

Mary and Patrick continue to share an office, and now handle the bulk of operations issues. However, the "terrain of commonality and connection" (hooks, 1994) created through years of dialogue between Jim, Mary and Patrick persists, and continues to sustain them as they work and laugh together.

Although the simple act of sharing an office (#1) was the first step in transforming this team of administrators into a "teaching community" (hooks, 1994), the ideas set forth in this paper emphasize flexibility and adaptability above all else. The purpose of this article was not to suggest that all administrative teams should share an office together. Rather, the purpose was to encourage those who are a part of an administrative team to consider how such things - office logistics (#1), communication styles (#2), task delegation (#3), learning cultures (#4), and ego needs (#5) - may impact the quality of their work life. We share these ideas with the sincere hope that they may be useful or meaningful to those who are seeking to move 'generally westward' in the direction of enjoying their administrative jobs a wee bit more.

References

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