the full frame approach 2.0

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a few notes on what follows

The Full Frame Approach\(^1\) is an articulation of the grounded theory that is playing out in a handful of effective, energetic, organizations across this country. These organizations have independently arrived at resonant ways of working with and in partnership with people and communities that most others have written off.

Each organization has a way of describing its work and purpose; each organization’s description is best for that organization. But across the chasm of words, these organizations are also highly resonant. The Full Frame Approach is our attempt to capture what resonance we can.

An approach is a worldview in action. As such, we have identified principles that, to be acted on, require a grounding set of assumptions and a correlate set of behaviors.

But approach alone is, we suggest, insufficient. This is not work for the faint of heart; it is not work that can be reduced to a set of instructions and policies. The organizations whose work inspires this articulation also require constant, generative leadership, and they are deeply embedded in and shaped by their communities. These additional elements of Place and Leadership are included in the Approach that follows; we call them out in reaction to a troubling national trend to minimize the importance of leadership and place in identifying what works in helping people and communities make and sustain transformative change.

This is a work in progress. Be in touch and help us continue to learn.

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\(^1\) The Full Frame Approach was originally described in Smyth, K. F., Goodman, L., and Glenn, C. (2006), The Full-Frame Approach: A new response to marginalized women left behind by specialized services. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76(4) 489-502. As we have learned more, we have continued to refine our articulation of this grounded theory. The version in this document reflects two additional years of work and observations, interviews and research in a larger group of organizations than for the initial articulation.
Individual/family strengthening and development, and community building are mutually reinforcing and equally reliant on each other

**Principle 1: Life is messy:** People’s vulnerabilities and strengths—both personal and contextual—interact in complex and unexpected ways, such that the interplay among issues and context needs to be addressed in concert with the issues themselves.

**Principle 2: Friends and family matter:** Relationships and role definitions are central for all of us and therefore need to be honored and respected, whether they are causing difficulties, providing support, or some of each.

**Principle 3: Through thick and thin and difference:** Supporting individuals and communities in envisioning, attempting and realizing new possibilities requires starting with and respecting what matters to people, and then relentlessly sticking with them.

**Principle 4: Be a community within the community, not an alternative to the larger community.** The human need to feel part of something where one can have impact and legacy is universal and is a necessary element in personal and community growth and sustained change. Full Frame Programs are a community in addition to others in people’s lives, rather than requiring people leave their community to participate.

**Principle 5: Place matters:** Organizational history is informed by and intertwined with that of an organization’s community, and its ability to impact individuals and families requires it be a force for good in the larger community, bridging to and building resources that benefit those who may never participate in the organization.

**Principle 6: Some of the best work happens in the gray areas:** Hold complexity without being paralyzed by it.

**Principle 7: Change is good:** Continually learn and evolve in concert with changes and opportunities in the community, in every relationship with participants, and in how participants and the organization and the community interact.

**Principle 8: It only works with the right people working:** Carefully select and support staff because this work is not for everyone and not everyone can or should do this work. Even the right people need tremendous support to do this work.

**Principle 9: Be accountable:** Pay attention to a wide range of indicators to ensure that the work being done is generating real, sustained results.

**Principle 10: Leadership matters:** Continuously foster and exert leadership, within the organization and the community.
Principle 1: Life is messy: People’s vulnerabilities and strengths—both personal and contextual—interact in complex and unexpected ways, such that the interplay among issues and context needs to be addressed in concert with the issues themselves.

We assume:

1. People’s individual psychological and physical experiences, and their external material and contextual situations are interwoven and cannot be fully teased apart.
2. Advocacy and instrumental support create emotional resonance and impact, just as many forms of emotional support enable people to enact practical strategies.
3. Simply coordinating services isn’t sufficient—people and their situations need to be seen as a whole, not as a conglomeration of pieces.

Therefore, we:

4. Do not draw bright lines around specific issues or problems. Even if we start by focusing on a specific issue, we expand our focus as this issue influences other realms of people’s lives and contexts.
5. Are flexible and creative in response to all this complexity and the dramatic, sudden turns people’s lives take.
6. Emphasize action and doing together as much as conversation and analysis, so as to partner with people in changing their context in addition to teaching people how to respond differently to the same context.
7. Help people think through potential consequences—positive and negative—of action and inaction, knowing that it is impossible for anyone to anticipate every consequence or to know what will work.
8. Combat fragmentation: Nurture a deep knowledge about and bridge to the web of systems, services and community resources (formal and informal), and connections with the people who make up these systems and resources. We:
   a. Do what it takes to make the community web of services and resources work for people, i.e., Enable participants to make meaningful use of specialized services and community resources they choose to or are required to participate in.
   b. Help mitigate the fragmentation associated with specialized services, and offer a place for sense-making and assistance when the priorities, culture and expectations of specialized service providers and systems clash or conflict, or when making progress in one area complicates other parts of participant’s life.
   c. Help other providers and community resources understand how and why a program participant is choosing to do what she does, and help others within our organization understand how and why other programs and institutions operate in the ways they do.
Principle 2: Friends and family matter: Relationships and role definitions are central for all of us and therefore need to be honored and respected, whether they are causing difficulties, providing support, or some of each.

We assume:

1. Relationships are valuable and transformative in and of themselves, not just as a means to a specific outcome.
2. Bonds with friends and family constrain and create individual options.
3. People learn what growth-fostering relationships are by experiencing such relationships, not by hearing about them.
4. Ignoring or devaluing a person’s most meaningful connections—even if they are hurtful—may make sustained progress untenable and therefore be a set-up for failure.
5. Peoples’ understanding of their roles in others’ lives and of others’ roles in their lives are important and deserve respect.
6. The purpose and import people assign to relationships and how they navigate relationships changes based on what other meaningful relationships exist in their lives.
7. Being an ally in personal and community transformation requires we be part of people’s relational context and they be part of ours.

Therefore, we:

8. Embed all work in enduring, flexible and intentional relationships, and in respect for the centrality of relationships in people’s lives.
9. Do not require or expect participants to abandon relationships with others in exchange for participation in our programs.
10. Frame relationships in terms of mutual growth, while continually monitoring around issues of power and transparency and roles.
11. Work to gain participants’ and community trust, recognizing trust is often tested as part of its being earned, and trust takes time to develop.
12. Privilege that relationships are vital to supporting every aspect of the organization’s work: among and between participants, staff, the organization as a community and the community at large, and other systems and services.
Principle 3: Through thick and thin and difference: Supporting individuals and communities in envisioning, attempting and realizing new possibilities requires starting with and respecting what matters to people, and then relentlessly sticking with them.

We assume:

1. People do what they do and choose what they do for a reason: Their framing of what is possible, probable, desirable and worth the effort and trade-offs (for themselves or for others) is heavily informed by past experiences, personal and cultural history, and current context.
2. Framing is changeable: As people have new experiences and acquire new information, resources and support, these understandings evolve.
3. What seems externally as “progress” may come with significant, even unbearable, consequences.
4. Our participants are not broken—just surviving requires strengths and strategies that can be channeled towards new possibilities.
5. People try new possibilities in a context and in relationships that acknowledge the losses and change that can come with success as well as with failure.
6. Not shying away from differences of perspective in the context of honest authentic relationships furthers everyone’s understanding of a situation and how to move forward.
7. Many people have experienced services and supports as transient and short-lived—it is their crises and community that have endured.
8. As organizations, we are responsible for holding hope that something better is possible without prescribing what that is.
9. Supporting people’s efforts to build better lives and stronger communities requires a spirit of partnership and mutuality, and a willingness on all sides to take risks.
10. Personal change takes hard work, but sustaining change may be even harder and usually requires different tactics from those employed to make the initial change.
11. There is a significant limit to what can be accomplished through conversation in an office-sticking with people requires we be with, grow with and take action with them.

Therefore, we:

12. Engage with people to understand our respective inner calculuses—the frame that informs peoples’ understandings of their situations, actions and options, while non-judgmentally paying attention to how these may differ.
13. Practice mutuality: We bring our understanding and experience to relationships in ways that may open new possibilities, but that don’t subjugate a participant’s framing of her choices or situation to our own. Everyone is changed by this process.
14. Integrate thinking and doing and reflecting, and involve ourselves in each of these areas with participants.

15. Partner with participants to explore multiple options if available, and hold each option up against the backdrop of participants' particular circumstances, and allow participants to choose which to pursue, and then support this pursuit and/or the person.

16. Work with people to buffer against complications created by moving forward if they choose to try a change, respect if they are not ready or willing to make a change, and respect if they choose some other action.

17. Stick with people through challenges, triumphs and transitions, and in situations that are ambiguous where no "good" choices may be apparent.

18. Do not make participation in our organization dependent on individuals' or a community's pursuit or achievement of a particular path or outcome (although we may have guidelines or criteria for specific programs)
Principle 4: Be a community within the community, not an alternative to the larger community. The human need to feel part of something where one can have impact and legacy is universal and is a necessary element in personal and community growth and sustained change. Full Frame Programs are a community in addition to others in people’s lives, rather than requiring people leave their community to participate.

We assume:

1. There is a human need to belong to something bigger than ourselves, where we are known by others for reasons other than our “problems.”

2. Giving back heals: People strive to impact others and find ways to give back to others.

3. Everyone—participant, staff, volunteer, community member—has a role to play, but everyone is not playing the same role. The organization serves as a crucible for growth and change for everyone.

4. In a community, the more you’ve invested of yourself, the more of a mark you can leave.

5. The need for community is not limited to program participants.

Therefore, we:

6. Intentionally build a sense of community as a context for services but not wholly defined by (and more valuable than just) services. Community is a scaffolding upon which informal networks and relationships can grow and where meaning making happens.

7. Enable and encourage participants to help and support each other, the organization, and the community, even if they are struggling. This builds social capital, a sense of ownership and power, and reveals participants’ strengths and builds ties to the community that are based on those strengths.

8. Support people’s efforts to stay connected to each other and to the organization in growth-fostering and meaningful ways.

9. Celebrate together as a community of people working side by side, rather than “helper and helped.”
Principle 5: Place matters: Organizational history is informed by and intertwined with that of an organization’s community, and its ability to impact individuals and families requires it be a force for good in the larger community, bridging to and building resources that benefit those who may never participate in the organization.

We assume:

1. The work we do grows from the strengths and particular opportunities, challenges and cultures of our community. The community we are in is worth building, not just escaping.
2. The place we are in deeply informs how the Approach is operationalized and understood.
3. We are shaped by and shape the place we are in.
4. To understand where we are today requires understanding how we got here.
5. Community development and organizing must not be separated from services. We cannot help individuals and families unless we are a partner in efforts to strengthen and change the larger community and systems we are part of.

Therefore we:

6. Participate in and/or lead formal and informal efforts to strengthen community resources and the web of services and systems that operate in the community. For many organizations, this includes community-development activities, and/or outreach and education activities and/or partnerships that do not directly build the Full Frame Program or organization, but that create new possibilities and resources that benefit Full Frame participants’ communities.
7. Carefully consider what needs to be provided in house and what can be provided through community-level partnerships-- when partnership to a resonant organization is not possible, or when partnership creates too great a barrier for participants, a service should be provided in house.
8. Cultivate an identity in the larger community of being a safe harbor and a place of possibilities when nothing else will work (a place to go if you need help without having to know exactly what you need).
9. Recognize the social capital in the community the organization is part of, and know the gatekeepers and power brokers, whether participants or politicians.
10. Participate at multiple “tables,” opportunities which are used for social change and alliance building for the sake of the community and issues, rather than simply for the organization’s betterment.
Principle 6: Some of the best work happens in the gray areas: Hold complexity without being paralyzed by it.

We assume:

1. No model will ever capture fully the essence of the work.
2. Different organizations that subscribe fully to this framework may differ radically on how they would handle a particular situation.
3. Our values are reflected in how we navigate dilemmas and sit with ambiguity around individual choices; staff, programming, and community issues; ethical versus legal boundaries; funding pressures and other tensions.
4. There are often few good choices, and the choices with the least immediate risk may carry the greatest risk for long-term harm or damage.

Therefore we:

5. Pay attention to tensions, such as:
   - Flattened power dynamics, mutuality, trust, authenticity and long-lasting relationships raise questions about boundaries.
   - We have a responsibility to support staff’s personal development and growth, but we have a larger responsibility to our participants’ personal development and growth. What if a staff person in one program is participating in another?
   - Who is an insider? Who is an outsider? Who decides and when does it matter?
   - How do we make our organization a micro-community people can flourish in, not get mired in?

6. Treat ambiguity that directly pertains to achieving our mission or the purposes of our organization as a leading edge of personal, professional and organizational growth, not as a sign of weakness or failure.

7. Work individually and collaboratively to differentiate between ambiguity that is mission enhancing and that we can learn from (either by tolerating it, or by moving through it to a solution) and ambiguity that is mission detracting and where clarity would be mission enhancing.
Principle 7: **Change is good:** Continually learn and evolve in concert with changes and opportunities in the community, in every relationship with participants, and in how participants and the organization and the community interact.

We assume:

1. What is relevant, needed, and appropriate for an individual and for the organization in the community changes over time.
2. To remain relevant and effective, we have to adapt.
3. We will be most effective when we can be transparent about where we have failed ourselves and our communities.

Therefore we:

4. Allow each person’s experience of the organization to be different and to change over time—tailored to his or her needs, strengths and context.
5. Expect and accommodate people’s participation at different intensities in different ways and/or at different times so as to be maximally relevant and helpful in their lives.
6. Cultivate a sense of the whole so that as people’s involvement changes, their movement among programs, components or elements of the organization can be relatively seamless.
7. Continually refine and evolve how the principles and particular organizational values are operationalized to improve and to remain relevant as communities and context evolve.
Principle 8: It only works with the right people working: Carefully select and support staff.

We assume:

1. This work is not for everyone and not everyone can or should do this work. The people who do this work best regard it as a privilege to work in this way.
2. Even the right people need tremendous support to do this work.

Therefore, we:

3. Carefully select staff for resonance with organizational values, ethical fiber and personal desire to grow, as well as for professional expertise (which may be gained through personal experience as well as through professional training) and ability to tolerate ambiguity
4. Provide support, supervision, reflection and training for staff to be able to remain engaged, creative, curious and hopeful so as to actualize the other principles and practices.
5. Support staff's personal, emotional and moral development as salient elements of professional development.
6. Expect staff to use their whole selves—their experience, opinions, knowledge and feelings—authentically and intentionally, being attentive to their roles, their power and to the risks and rewards inherent in "use of self."
7. Support staff (perhaps through agency action and leadership) in navigating when ethical and legal obligations conflict and/or when actualizing the mission is in conflict with some other obligation.
8. Recognize doing Full Frame work challenges traditional notions of boundaries and bright lines and requires tremendous support and processing.
9. Nurture staff's ability to remain relentlessly hopeful and to stick with people and situations.
10. Work hard to keep the right people working at and with the organization for a long time.
Principle 9: Be accountable: Pay attention to a wide range of indicators to ensure that the work being done is generating real, sustained results.

We assume:

1. We must be directly answerable to the people who come to us and the communities that we are embedded in, recognizing that participants and community are not monolithic.
2. We are also answerable to other systems, members of our community who do not think the way we do, and other stakeholders.
3. How we are held accountable by various stakeholders should and will be different; it is our job to ensure that answering to these different audiences does not pull us off our purpose but does present our purpose and our work in ways most resonant with the concerns of our audience.

Therefore we:

4. Reflect on, understand, document and work to maximize impact without prescribing blanket goals or outcomes to hold universally for all program participants.
5. Recognize when progress and process are themselves products, and when they are not.
6. Pay attention to data but evaluate on more than numbers.
7. Hold staff accountable for actualizing the values of the organization (and the principles of the Approach).
8. Regularly reflect on whether the day to day work and operations of the organization are reflective of the organization's values and principles, and, if not, we change what we are doing or how we are doing it.
9. Manage the tensions in being accountable to many different stakeholders to maximize our mission without compromising our ability to be true to those who come to us and the communities we are in.
Principle 10: **Leadership matters:** Continuously foster and exert leadership, within the organization and the community.

**Emergent elements:**

- Recognize that the focus on the right people in the right positions with the right support includes but is not limited to ED/Director/Authority positions. At the same time, there is a recognition that leadership has to be manifest continuously at these levels.

- Leadership isn’t management: it makes tough choices and leads organization to actualize mission and not compromise mission.

- Leadership develops a culture of accountability-- to the mission, to the community -- that is held throughout the organization and that is understood outside the organization.

- Supporting participants to become staff and developing their leadership capacity and supporting them in community change efforts.

- Development of leadership in the community—not only to create a ladder within the organization, but as a larger force.

- Recognize that this leadership may eventually challenge organizational leadership.

- Allowing people to be leaders even while participants, even if that means they aren’t just focusing on themselves.

- Leadership in the community, at “different tables”-- Saying what needs to be said, and being savvy about who the messenger is.

- Organization as a leader; organization’s heads as leaders.

- Leadership is ideologically wedded to vision, but is pragmatic in pursuit of that ideology.

- Leadership is collective—organizations practice more fluid leadership than authoritarian.