

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE + KEY INSIGHTS

w/ **Lindsay Holden**
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Moving From Collaboration to Connection

*Strengthening system connections that
improve outcomes for children and families.*

Lindsay Holden brings more than 13 years of experience in child welfare, including frontline practice, foster care, adoption, quality improvement, workforce development, and systems change leadership. Prior to joining the National Center, she served as Assistant Deputy Director of Foster Care and Adoptions for Oklahoma Human Services. Today, she supports organizations working to strengthen implementation, collaboration, and system connections that improve outcomes for children and families.

What is one of the biggest challenges you see when it comes to strengthening connections across systems?

One of the biggest challenges is that people and organizations can genuinely value collaboration, but still be working from different goals, language, processes, or measures of success. In child welfare and behavioral health, for example, we can all want the same thing for children and families while approaching the work from very different perspectives and having different ideas about how to accomplish it. Both, and, is what should be respected and brought together here. True collaboration requires us to value those different areas of expertise and recognize that we need both to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

My experience in child welfare has taught me that strong relationships are the foundation, but relationships alone aren't enough. Collaboration must exist for those who are not yet connected too. We have to create shared understanding and practical ways for people to work together across systems. That means making sure the right people are at the table, creating a common language, and building processes that make collaboration part of how the work actually happens, not just something that happens as part of a one-time project.

What does it look like to move from simply talking about collaboration to actually building it?

For me, it means moving from collaboration as a conversation to collaboration as a practice standard for how we work.

It starts with identifying a shared purpose and then asking, “What would it take for us to work differently together?” Each of us can approach the work in front of us and ask, “Who is missing? What expertise or experience do I need to bring into this work?”

It also means creating opportunities for people to build relationships around the actual work, not just meeting together, but solving problems together. When we value different areas of expertise and create space for people to

shape the work together, collaboration becomes something that is built into how we work rather than something we have to continually create.

And as a leader, I think the place to start is by modeling it. What does it look like to truly collaborate, to listen, to value expertise that may be different from our own, and to create space for others to shape the work? Leaders set the tone for how systems work together. When collaboration is something leaders consistently demonstrate, support, and expect, it becomes part of the culture rather than something that depends on individual relationships or a particular project.

The goal isn't simply to get systems to collaborate. It's to make sure that collaboration is felt by the families and professionals we serve.

What is one thing leaders can do today to better support families and professionals?

Listen to the people closest to the work, and then do something with what you hear.

Families, young people, and frontline professionals often have the clearest understanding of where systems are working and where they're creating barriers. Leaders don't have to have every answer, but they can create the conditions for people to be heard and then use that information to make meaningful changes.

For me, this is one of the most important lessons from working in child welfare and now in implementation and systems change: we can't improve systems from a distance. We need the expertise of the people experiencing and delivering those systems. Without that, it becomes a well-intended guessing game that can result in outcomes that weren't planned for or foreseen. We end up with ideas that “should work” instead of responses to actual needs.

When leaders make space for those voices, build trust, and remove barriers that get in the way of doing good work, we create stronger systems and ultimately better experiences and outcomes for children and families.