

## Implementation of Signs of Safety as a learning journey

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## Introduction

Implementation of a new approach does not stand alone. Generally, we want a structured, but above all a realistic implementation. We build an implementation process around the practice, it's the practice that guides the implementation. With the implementation we want to enable, support and secure the practice.

One of the biggest learning points in the Panda project is the importance of history and recognition that we are all part of a greater system. Organisations are like living systems in a certain culture with operating values. Choosing a model, framework or approach, especially when founded in a different culture or context, has to be done very consciously. What does it mean to introduce/ to align an empowering, participatory model in a practice, when this practice takes shape in a wider social, economic and political context? This is one of the reasons we don't want to recommend one model or approach, but rather share our experiences, learning and our best wisdom and stories from different implementation journeys to support participatory practice. This is a Flemish story and I'm happy to share our learnings.

### **'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'**

With an implementation process you want to make the desired practice possible, support it and also safeguard it. Central to our vision we underlined that we work together with children, families and their network to create safety. If we really want children to participate in youth care, have a voice and especially want to take / give direction, it requires a paradigm shift in how we look at children and clients from a solution and strength-oriented attitude. Even in the context of juvenile justice, we believe it is possible to work from this paradigm. As youth-care and child protection workers, we are all just passing through in the lives of children and young people. We are aware that there are limits to our own expertise and, where necessary, we enter into partnership with other professional actors. We hope to develop shared commitments within the collaboration for the benefit of the process we enter into with families. In this way we want to think and be able to use our best together to help parents and their network create safety for their children. We see a need and space for this from the moment clients enter our services to the moment we can let them go again.

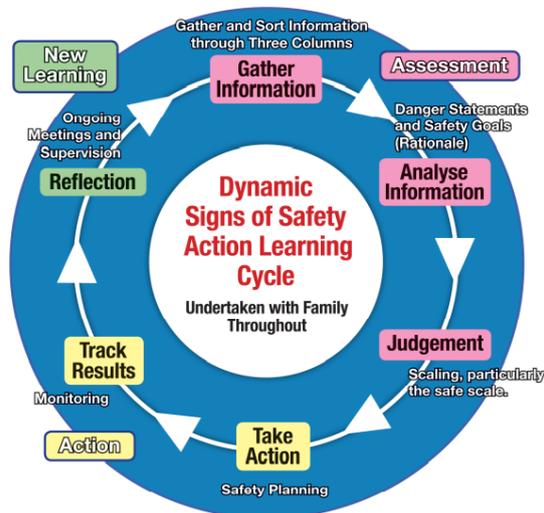
***Culture eats strategy for breakfast (Peter Drucker).*** You can come up with many strategies, but you cannot ignore a culture. You need different interventions, methods and tools but above all you need an approach that feeds or organizes the organisational culture. If you are a small or a large organisation, you never work or operate alone. One of the biggest learning points in the Panda project is you are operating in a certain culture with operating values. Choosing participation is choosing a vision and this may or may not be congruent with the existing paradigms in your society, organisation or youth care system, so it is also choosing a paradigm shift. As an agency we've chosen the implementation Signs of Safety as our main approach to our practice. Signs of Safety reflects our best practice principles. Children and their families will be at the center of our work, our assessment, our decision making, and our support.

### **A learning process**

'Implementing is reflecting... and learning' (Boendermaker, 2011). In other words, it is a dynamic process or a learning journey. At the start, we determine what we want to see changed (desired

future) and draw up plans and objectives, which are regularly evaluated and adjusted if necessary. With the described objective, SofS as an approach puts the spotlight on that desired future and emphasizes that learning plays an important role in it. It was and is a real challenge to translate SofS into the Flemish context.

Turnell and Murphy (2017) introduced the action learning cycle in the Signs of Safety approach in 2014 to encourage the process of continuous learning by the professionals and organisations in youth protection.



Action learning assumes that most knowledge and skills are gained by doing and experiencing and by structurally reflecting on the actions with colleagues, in particular by sharing good practices with other professionals. We grew from a process of action research. The collaborative inquiry process is essential to the success of sustainable growth of an agency toward the Signs of Safety model. We had to investigate what SofS may look like in our context of youth care/child protection in Flanders. We had to try out what’s working well for us, what’s not working. As a part of the ongoing

quest for learning, it is continuously asking and answering questions like: “What does good social work look like, even in hard cases?” “How do workers build partnerships with parents and children in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse and still deal rigorously with the maltreatment issues?” “Is this matching with the different missions of the organisation?” These different ways of learning are necessary to deepen and sustainably anchor SofS in practice. In order to be able to learn, an environment is needed that offers you the necessary space and possibilities for this.

In order to achieve sustainable change, but especially to make it possible for employees to work in this collaborative way, more will be needed than just education, training and supervision. It is explicitly requested that the organisation include these in its broader vision, strategy, objectives, processes and supporting procedures to enable an organisation-wide embedding of the approach.

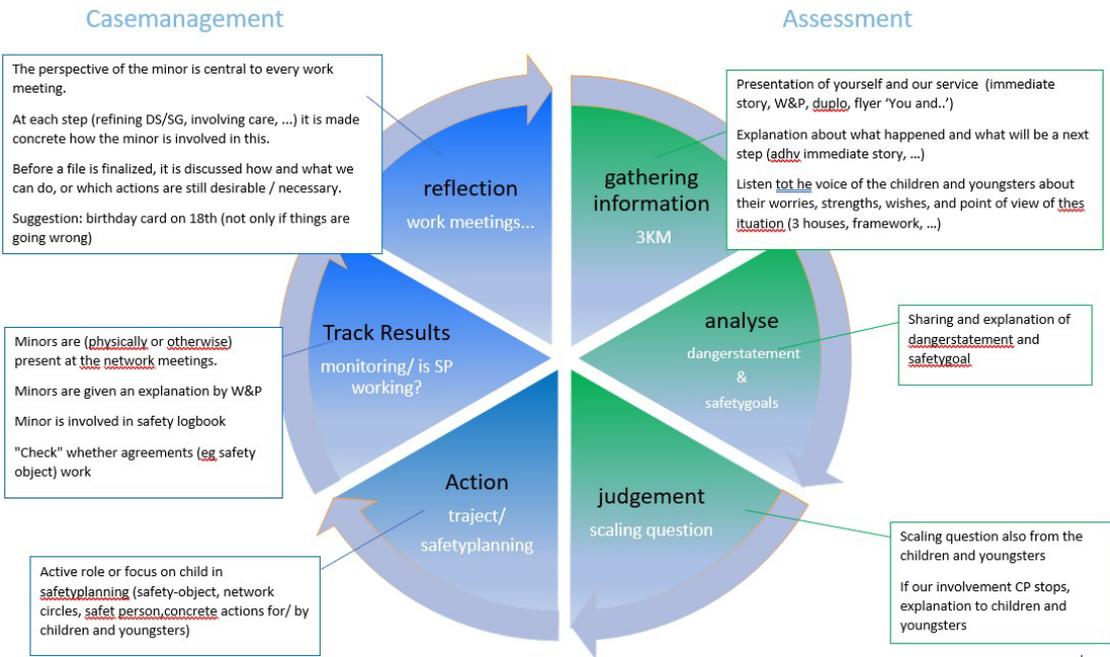
## Reflecting and acting in uncertainty

Becoming a learning organisation and thinking, working and being solution focused is a challenge but also a condition. We often work in very precarious situations where the safety of children is not always assured. This is accompanied by the necessary uncertainty and sometimes fear. Decisions concerning these children and young people affect their lives and living environment and involve risks. To dare to choose in these circumstances the development towards a learning organisation is a special challenge, which we take on with enthusiasm and is well-considered. We want to instill a culture in which joint reflection, dialogue, peer learning and team learning are fixed values, registered in our processes. From the Flemish level we try to explicitly support and emphasize that constant learning is essential for personal professional growth and organisational development. The learning is never finished. An open and transparent culture encourages a learning attitude on an

individual level, where employees are looking for a challenge, asking questions, asking for help, wondering how they can do better. We are aware that we work daily in risky situations, in which 'making mistakes' is not desirable, but is inherent in working with people and we as humans are our own instrument. In such a context, we need leaders who dare to stand behind their employees and families. When an incident/error does happen, an employee feels supported by the organisation, questions are clarified together and it is examined how we deal with it and how we could do it differently. Reflection on one's own actions is central throughout the organisation where constant growth is an opportunity and a possibility.

Choosing for SofS, a practice model, also means we had to revise our procedures and processes. We could not just 'copy paste SofS' into our reality. In the first years of implementation, we investigated what SofS could look like within the Flemish context. We tried out what works and discovered what doesn't work. Even today, we continue to wonder what "good work" looks like for us, even in difficult circumstances. The new processes were redesigned and were created from practical experiences in a strong interaction with policy. Looking together at what works, what is going well and what 'best practices' we have, is the engine that helps us grow and develop. The focus on the child and really involving them and including them in their trajectory is more than seeing and hearing them once during the research. Giving children a voice throughout the process means that consultants are creative, explain why we are involved, what will happen and give them a voice in this. We invest in a cooperative relationship with their parents so that they give us the mandate to also work with their children and vice versa. The figure (1) below is a translation of the action learning cycle into taking children as an active partner: what is minimally necessary throughout the process, how can they be a permanent partner and how can we conclude meaningfully?

Figure 1: Practical guide youth protection Flanders: processes OCJ & SDJ.



During the implementation, we also looked critically at the procedures followed. What form of consultation is supportive in the decision-making, planning and follow-up process of clients?

## Walk the talk

Thinking about the focus you want to take in a case or in a conversation is crucial to be able to enter into a process with the clients in a good way. A network consisting of colleagues consultants, members of a multidisciplinary team, a team manager,... where the consultant can go for reflection and questions is supportive. Preparation for contacts with clients is something that should be central throughout the entire process. It helps to keep the focus and control on the anxiety and on the impact on the child and to arrive at a more targeted approach. To this end, we reformed our team meetings and installed what we call 'process teams'. It is a dynamically interesting instrument, a form of consultation that contributes to the substantive and process-based follow-up of a file and creates a more shared responsibility and support in decision-making from the start. A fresh look, a moment of reflection contributes to thinking about next steps, about possible questions, about blind spots and how you can tackle them,... It requires a certain vulnerability and at the same time supports the actions of the consultant. It further professionalizes the consultant in his / her actions and is specific to a learning organisation!

There must be an investment on every level in the organisation, which means that we are not only implementing SofS in the direct work with families, but also pay attention to the way leadership and human resources takes shape. There is a strong focus on the parallel processes. **Walk the talk.** We need strong leadership and obvious commitment from the leaders. As a leader you have to articulate the vision and direction. We have a plan and we set our goals of what we would like to see happening in our organisation, but the road isn't that easy or straight ahead. It's an evolving journey, with highs and depths. As a policymaker you have to give vision and direction, but you don't need to give every answer or solution. **Be the wind under their wings.** We have to model to slow down, to let the process happen and let them think through the issues leading them by asking questions and let them come with solutions before we impose ours. Alone you go faster, together you go further. Bring the practitioners together and give them a voice. We've established different fora at different levels in the organisation (such as Flemish level, regional and local level) and we facilitate exchange between policy and practice, which is very enriching. We achieve a lot with employees, we encourage them, we give them ownership of the implementation, let them experiment. So we are working together on one story that creates a connection. We try to listen more truly, lie back and ask questions to let the others think. We've learned how liberating it is and helpful for implementation it is to share responsibility with workers and colleagues. We take time without losing focus. We emphasize the learning process, also in the evaluation of the progress in our practice: we look for the small steps, the things that are going well and who or what can help to take a step further. This evaluation has shown us that it's all about attitude and getting into interactions with each other. We talk about the evolution of the implementation, we evaluate, create things to support the implementation,... In this way we have a connection with the practice and can they give direction to the policy. Intelligence happens in relationships.

*An example of really committed leadership we were witness to: practice what you preach  
Colin Gildernew, Former Chair of the NI Assembly Health Committee : 'The more future you have the more you have to have a voice'*

## References

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