

# ANZSOG Case Program

## ChildProtect: an agency under fire (C)

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### POST SCRIPT: A CALL FOR LEARNING AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

Column by Erik Gerritsen on the website for Dutch public administration professionals (abbreviated):

‘De noodzaak tot bestuurlijk leren.’ *Binnenlands Bestuur*, 06 April 2015.

If you are an alderman responsible for youth care and do not regularly bring together the directors of your executive agencies to learn about concrete and shared challenges, you can be assured that your desired organisational improvement will fail to materialise. [...] And if you think that you don't have this problem, because you do meet regularly with your agency directors, then ask yourself whether these meetings have the character of a negotiation - where people play strategic games - or that these meetings are a learning environment - with frank conversations about organisational interests, a shared understanding of dysfunctional administrative behaviour, and a sincere attempt to break through this behaviour and replace it with more productive ways of interacting.

My guess is, if you do have regular meetings with the directors, that they are all about negotiations. And that they lend themselves very poorly for learning and improvement. [...] I therefore suggest to launch a cycle of administrative learning sessions, chaired by the alderman responsible for youth care. This is the only way in which we can achieve the much-needed transformation of youth care. Because if the senior managers, as the people who are ultimately responsible for creating an adaptive system, cannot learn themselves, they become an obstacle to change instead.

Such administrative learning sessions are quite simple to organize. The alderman only has to use his or her 'capacity to convene' and call all directors together to reflect on the work of the youth care system. These sessions should be fed directly from the experiences and challenges of street-level youth care. This brings a direct and permanent connection between the world of policymakers and the world of professionals. The sessions should also focus on concrete case studies because the senior managers will not be able to look away if a child is in real and dire needs through the lack of cooperation between the agencies.

This text is an addendum to the case written by Dr Scott Douglas, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Erik Gerritsen and Marc Dinkgreve of the child protection agency for the greater Amsterdam area is acknowledged, as are the suggestions of John Alford, Paul 't Hart and Karin Geuijen.

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[...] These meetings should be characterised by an uncompromising focus on the purpose of youth care: Keeping every child safe. [...] To then come up with unorthodox solutions requires a value-driven dialogue between policy makers and professionals: The battered professionals may sometimes lack the overview to come up with unorthodox solutions, and the policy makers should descend from their ivory towers. Only through cooperation can we recognize that both the policy makers and professionals are needed to make it work. [...] The new youth alderman of Amsterdam, Simone Kukenheim, will launch her first administrative learning session soon. I hope others will take her lead.