When Leadership Blocks Person-Centered Culture: A Hidden Barrier in Human Service Organizations

In human service organizations accredited by the Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL), the **person-centered approach** is not just a best practice — it is a **foundational requirement**. CQL's Basic Assurances demand that dignity, respect, and individual choice guide service delivery at every level.

But there is a growing concern: **When organizational culture at the upper levels is driven more by control, compliance, or self-interest than by empathy and inclusion, the person-centered approach cannot fully take root.** Even when direct support staff are trained and values are posted, the lived experience may tell another story.

The Hidden Influence of Leadership Psychology

Research, including studies by psychologist Dr. Kevin Dutton (University of Oxford), suggests that traits associated with psychopathy — such as lack of empathy, emotional detachment, and manipulativeness — are more commonly found in high-ranking leadership roles than in the general population. In fast-paced or high-stakes environments, these traits may be misinterpreted as confidence, decisiveness, or strategic thinking.

In the human services field, however, these traits can **directly contradict** the values required for person-centered supports.

"If you want to find psychopaths, the last place you should look is in a prison. You should look in the corporate boardroom."
— Dr. Kevin Dutton, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success* (Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012)

How This Undermines Person-Centered Practices

When individuals in senior roles — including vice presidents, directors, assistant directors, and other top-level managers — operate from a command-and-control mindset, the following patterns often emerge:

- **Authenticity is replaced by performative compliance.** Values are quoted but not lived.
- **Direct support workers face ethical tensions**, expected to uphold person-centered principles under leadership that may not consistently model them.
- **Cultural dissonance spreads downward**, weakening the clarity and strength of person-centered expectations.

This disconnect signals that **person-centeredness is optional**, or worse, only relevant at the frontline level.

What's Needed: A Cultural Reset from the Top

To realize a truly person-centered system, **senior leadership must actively embody the same values expected of frontline workers**:

- **Empathy over image**
- **Collaboration over control**
- **Transparency over manipulation**

This requires **intentional leadership development**, including self-awareness, values-based training, and clear feedback structures that hold all levels of leadership accountable.

What Standards Can Do

At AMSI, we believe voluntary consensus standards can help bridge this gap. By clearly defining what leadership accountability looks like in person-centered systems — including behavioral expectations, training components, and structural supports — we can protect the integrity of the values we all claim to uphold.

Person-centeredness is not just a service model. It's a culture. And like all cultures, it must start with leadership — at every level.