Implementation Teams: The Missing Link for Scaling and Sustaining Effective Practice

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RESEARCHERS STUDYING BEHAVIOR change in individuals on community supervision have promoted evidence-based approaches for decades, and meta-analyses by Andrews et al. (1990), Andrews and Bonta (2006), and Lipsey and colleagues (Lipsey, 1992, 2009; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998) identified key intervention factors that were associated with improved outcomes for this population. However, it has been generally acknowledged that using interventions in practice is difficult, and it is increasingly understood that the competence and confidence of the probation officers and other practitioners who work directly with the individuals on community supervision need to be actively supported to use innovation as intended. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that training only, even when carried out to a high standard, is insufficient. Lipsey described that "in some analyses, the quality with which the intervention is implemented has been as strongly related to recidivism effects as the type of program, so much so that a well-implemented intervention of an inherently less efficacious type can outperform a more efficacious one that is poorly implemented" (2009, p. 127). However, the organizational mechanisms required to build the competence and the confidence of probation officers, across 94 judicial districts, have seemed elusive. With implementation support increasingly recognized as essential to using innovations as intended, to produce intended outcomes reliably and repeatedly on a useful scale, interest is growing in exploring approaches to establish, scale, and sustain sufficient implementation capacity (Fixsen, Blase, & Van Dyke, 2019; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). This article will describe the function and development of Implementation Teams within organizations and systems as a mechanism to scale and sustain implementation capacity (Brunk, Chapman, & Schoenwald, 2014; Fixsen, Blase, Timbers, & Wolf, 2007; Saldana & Chamberlain, 2012).

Over the years, Implementation Teams have been described as change agents, site developers, community development teams, facilitators, and so on (Blase, Fixsen, & Phillips, 1984; Flanagan, Cray, & Van Meter, 1983; Nord & Tucker, 1987; Seers et al., 2018). For example, Havelock and Havelock (1973, p. 59ff) noted that "Effective implementation requires reciprocal feedback systems in the context of reciprocal and collaborative relationships with a variety of stakeholders." This work requires an effective change agent:

> The change agent is a *catalyst* (prod and pressure, overcome inertia, create dissatisfaction, get things started), *solution giver* (know what and when, where, to whom to deliver it, technical proficiency), *process helper* (recognize and define needs, diagnose problems and set objectives, acquire needed resources, select or create solutions, adapt or install solutions, evaluate to determine progress), and *resource linker* (people, time, motivation, funds) (italics added for emphasis) (Havelock & Havelock, 1973, p. 59ff).

For a community development team (CDT), "the CDT facilitator is able to bring concerns or problems that particular programs are experiencing to the developers and problem-solve solutions that assist the program while maintaining adherence to the principles of the practice. Finally, during the CDT Sustainability phase, the emphasis shifts to monitoring and supporting the maintenance of a model adherent program via titrated technical assistance and peer support activities" (Saldana & Chamberlain, 2012, pp. 3-4).

As noted in these brief descriptions, Implementation Teams are active and take responsibility for encouraging and producing change with practitioners, organizations, and systems (Fixsen et al., 2019, Chapter 14). In this role, an Implementation Team works closely with the executive leadership of an organization to initiate and manage change. The team members are experts in identifying and developing usable innovations, experts in their own use of implementation best practices, and skilled at initiating, facilitating, and managing systemic change processes. Implementation Teams balance and negotiate the adaptive and technical work of complex change. Team members assess and engage with individual and organizational "will" (i.e., readiness, buy-in, motivation, commitment, urgency) for the new way of work. However, "will" without "skill" produces frustration and undermines actual practice change. Therefore, Implementation Teams also coordinate the installation of the infrastructure needed to

grow and improve the "skill" of individuals at each level of the system to be able to make full use of the new way of work (i.e., capability, adherence, competence, expertise).

Implementation Teams are not common in human services, but they need to be, so that effective innovations and interventions can be used as intended and produce benefits on a meaningful scale (Fixsen, Blase, & Fixsen, 2017; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). In the federal probation system, Implementation Teams are critically important, because outcomes depend on the interactions among people—probation officers and other practitioners who interact directly with individuals on supervision. If innovations are to be used effectively in each of the 94 districts, who will be there to ensure that each innovation is used as intended by probation officers and others so that good outcomes are achieved? Given the large numbers of people involved, their geographic distribution across the nation, and the turnover in probation officers and individuals on supervision, it is especially important to have expert Implementation Teams that can support staff as they learn to use more effective practices in their daily interactions with people on supervision. The haphazard supports currently intermittently available must be replaced by expert Implementation Teams, a permanent support for achieving excellent outcomes that can be sustained and replicated across locations.

Implementation Team: Defined

Keeping in mind that implementation is for solving problems, achieving goals, and sustaining outcomes for whole populations, Implementation Teams are *teams* and not individuals who might occasionally work together. When an individual is the "change agent," all of the learning and skill and institutional memory is gone when that person leaves the position. On the other hand, teams are sustainable (Klest, 2014; Walker, Koroloff, & Schutte, 2003), with sufficient critical mass to replenish themselves as staff turnover occurs in the team (Morgan, 1997). Structurally they are a unit within an organization that reports directly to senior leadership; their roles are part of the organization; their functions are included in policies and procedures; and their knowledge, skills, and abilities are regularly assessed.

The three to five individuals who are the Implementation Team are accountable for ensuring that the Implementation Drivers (selection, training, coaching, fidelity, decision-support data systems, facilitative administration, systems intervention, and technical and adaptive leadership) are in place, are functioning as intended, and are improving with experience and data. Team members do not do all the work themselves, but they are accountable for seeing that it is carried out. In an aligned and integrated human service organization, people who work full time in other positions are purposefully prepared to provide sections of practitioner training workshops, do fidelity assessments, conduct selection interviews, re-write policies and procedures, and so on to ensure that each Implementation Drivers is done as intended with and for all practitioners and others in the organization. An organization may have 500 employees and an Implementation Team of 5 or 6 people who ensure that others are prepared to do their part as needed to support each practitioner (e.g., be trained as a trainer, be prepared to be a high reliability fidelity assessor).

Implementation Team Preparation

Implementation Team members are carefully selected, trained, coached, evaluated, and supported. The knowledge, skills, and abilities required of team members have been identified and operationalized (Van Dyke, 2015). An Implementation Team member must:

- Know the intervention/strategy (formal and practice knowledge),
- Know implementation (formal and practice knowledge),
- Know improvement cycles, and
- Know systemic change.

The 10 core competencies are:

1. Relationship development.
2. Leadership engagement and guidance.
3. Implementation instruction.
4. Implementation facilitation.
5. Intervention operationalization.
6. Team development.
7. Data-informed decision-making.
8. Strategic analysis to support change.
9. Team-based project management.
10. Coaching.

Given the key role of Implementation Teams and the multiple functions of team members, members are selected using best practices. In an interview process involving discussion, scenarios, and role plays, Implementation Team members are selected for their general skills and abilities. The experience of candidates may have been successful or not; the important thing is that they have some experience doing something in each area. An important consideration is to select Team members who have a variety of strengths, so the Team as a whole can be successful in the complex world of change. Each person can add to the "collective competency" of a Team (Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson, & Zazanis, 1995). Once a Team is formed, the shared competencies lead to redundant knowledge, skills, and abilities within a Team where the whole (group knowledge) is reflected in each part (individual Team member) (Morgan & Ramirez, 1983).

Implementation Team Operations

Although Implementation Team members are accountable for ensuring the full and effective use of innovations, the members do not do all the work themselves. They do it, find it, or create it. For example, an innovation may not be well known to the team. In that case, they can access those who are experts in the innovation and include them in designing implementation supports for the innovation (e.g., content for training and coaching). Or an innovation may be a good idea that does not meet any of the Usable Innovation criteria; in this case the Implementation Team would operationalize the innovation so that it is teachable, learnable, doable, assessable, and scalable in practice (Fixsen et al., 2019). In this instance, the Implementation Team engages in usability testing (an Improvement Cycle) to create a Usable Innovation.

Implementation Teams are an essential part of an organization structure to support full and effective use of innovations within an organization or system. Implementation Teams are the creators of capacity and coherence in otherwise fragmented organizations and systems. In this process, Implementation Teams deal with contradictions and paradoxes. Creating capacity and coherence in otherwise fragmented organizations and systems requires constant adjustment while balancing between different approaches and objectives. Zink (2014, p. 130) describes some of the factors that must be balanced during times of change:

- Balancing the speed of change: There is a clear trade-off between the speed of change and the quality of change defined as shared ownership and understanding of decisions and policies.
- Balancing the different interests among key stakeholders (and system components): Inviting all stakeholders and giving them the possibility to integrate their own ideas makes balancing easier.

- Balancing the short term and the long term: Short-term results are necessary to foster motivation and involvement, but have to be aligned with long-term strategies.
- Balancing static and dynamic efficiency: Health systems demand a high level of productivity; to reach these results, individual and organizational learning are necessary.
- Balancing specialization and integration: In healthcare this is the balancing between standardized pathways and individual needs of patients.

An Implementation Team is designed to work with 20 or so practitioners in an organization. This ratio varies with population density, size of individual organizations, and geography (accessibility). The ratio can be used as a guide for planning expansion into additional organizations until all organizations are included. Implementation Team members specifically:

- Engage in Exploration Stage activities to create the will (readiness, motivation, buy-in, importance, commitment) to use an innovation and establish the implementation supports necessary to sustain and scale the benefits over time and locations.
- Develop (select, train, coach, assess, support) the skills (ability, competence, confidence) of leaders and practitioners to support effective use of innovations and outcomes.
- Conduct Implementation Capacity Assessments and facilitate action planning.
- Create or modify training materials, fidelity measures, and evaluation tools related to effective innovation methods that are being scaled up in the organization.
- Initiate and actively engage in continuous quality improvement cycles with leaders and staff.
- Engage in problem solving with the leaders to improve and align effective organization supports for practitioners using an innovation.

Implementation Team Effectiveness

Although they are not common yet, Implementation Teams are essential to building effective, efficient, and sustainable capacity to use innovations as intended and for establishing contexts that are more enabling and less hindering. Implementation Team members do the work of implementation and are accountable for using implementation best practices with fidelity and good outcomes. Given the central role of Implementation Teams, the selection, training, coaching, and fidelity assessment of teams is a critical part of implementation done well.

Implementation Teams have been developed on purpose since the 1980s (Blase, 2006; Blase et al., 1984). In recent years, the work has expanded into developing linked Implementation Teams (using Implementation Teams to create more Implementation Teams) in support of systemic change and the use of a variety of innovations (Fixsen et al., 2017; Fixsen et al., 2013). Data regarding the value of expert Implementation Teams indicate that an expert Implementation Team produces about 80 percent success in implementing a program or innovation in about three years (Fixsen et al., 2007; Saldana, Chamberlain, Wang, & Brown, 2012). Without the support of an expert Implementation Team, there is about 14 percent success in 17 years (Balas & Boren, 2000; Green, 2008). As they do their work, Implementation Teams accumulate knowledge. They engage in planned and purposeful activities (the Active Implementation Frameworks), see the immediate and longer term results, solve problems related to the use of innovations and use of implementation supports in organizations and systems, and use the experience to develop a revised plan for the next attempt.

Implementation Supports in General

The knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to support the use of innovations in practice often are not discussed. Many descriptions fit the letting-it-happen and helping-it-happen categories of diffusion and dissemination approaches described by Hall and Hord (1987); Greenhalgh et al. (2004); and Fixsen, Blase, Duda, Naoom, and Van Dyke (2010). These approaches describe the need for support without describing the competencies required or the need for creating permanent implementation capacity in organizations and systems. For example, Damschroder et al. (2009) propose that successful implementation usually requires an active change process aimed to achieve individual- and organizational-level use of the intervention as designed. Local champions or external change agents manage processes that are designed to produce the use of an innovation as intended. They identified four types of implementation leaders and other individuals involved in the active change process:

1. Opinion leaders who have formal or informal influence on their colleagues with respect to knowledge of and use of innovations.
2. Champions who risk their reputation and status to actively support the use of an innovation and overcome any problems associated with its use in an organization.
3. Formally appointed implementation leaders (project manager or similar role) who have responsibility for ensuring use of an innovation as part of their work.
4. External change agents who are contracted to facilitate the introduction and use of an innovation in an organization.

In the ARC approach (Glisson & Schoenwald, 2005) a change agent's role is described in more detail. Change agents span organization and system boundaries to share information between individuals, groups, organizations, and communities; provide updates about innovation efforts; diagnose problems in the process of improving services; motivate community interest in innovation; create interpersonal networks that include community opinion leaders; reinforce efforts to improve services; and prevent discontinuance of improvement strategies that are working.

Aarons, Hurlburt, and Horwitz (2011) describe the extensive work required to assess a range of psychological characteristics of practitioners and managers and assess organizational fit, readiness, culture, and climate. In a framework component labeled "inter-organizational networks," Aarons et al. state: "A key extra-organizational feature that may encourage the implementation of EBPs is the network of organizations with which agencies are involved. When agencies or organizations interact with other organizations that employ EBPs, this has the potential to increase their own likelihood of exploring or adopting EBPs." This is followed by a statement that, "building expertise across an entire service system may require collaboration and building expertise across and between organizations to instantiate and sustain an EBP."

Chinman, Imm, and Wandersman (2004) emphasize the key role of a community coalition for planning successful implementation. A good plan provides a roadmap and a set of reminders of what is important when. Good planning can lead to improved use of an innovation, leading to improved innovation outcomes. A community coalition can make midcourse modifications as experience

is gained during the implementation process. Wandersman et al. (2008) identify innovation-specific support (innovation-specific capacity building) and general support (general capacity building) provided by community coalitions. Innovation-specific capacity building is assistance that is related to using a specific innovation. It can include activities such as providing information about an innovation before an organization decides if it wants to adopt and providing technical assistance once the innovation is in use.

Rycroft-Malone (2004) acknowledges the need for facilitation of implementation, and notes that the purpose of facilitation can vary from a focused process of providing help and support in achieving a specific task to a more complex, holistic process of enabling teams and individuals to analyze, reflect upon, and change their own attitudes, behaviors, and ways of working. As the approach moves toward holistic, facilitation is increasingly concerned with addressing the whole situation and the whole person. In these different situations, the skills and attributes required of the facilitator would be different. To fulfill the potential demands of the role, facilitators are likely to require a wide repertoire of skills and attributes. Skilled facilitators would be ones who could adjust their role and style to suit the demands of the different phases of an implementation or development project.

Doing the Work of implementation to Achieve the Desired Outcomes

As seen in these summaries, implementation researchers generally identify the need for action to support the use of innovations in practice. The complexity of the tasks is outlined along with some suggestions for finding self-appointed or somehow-organized groups who might take on these tasks. These recommendations leave a lot to chance and likely cannot be relied on for scaling to achieve socially significant outcomes.

Active Implementation specifies the need for Implementation Teams embedded in organizations and systems that intend to use innovations fully and effectively and sustain them on a socially significant scale (Fixsen et al., 2019). No one expects software to continue to run after a brief encounter with hardware, or cell phones to operate without supporting microwave towers and switching equipment. Implementation Teams play the same essential and continuing role for effective innovations (Fixsen et al., 2017). Waiting for the right people to show up to do the work may take a long time and cannot be depended on, especially over the long run. Expert Implementation Teams are essential for successful and timely use of innovations and must be planned for and established as the work begins.

Commitment to research on effective interventions and the use of evidence has been a hallmark of policy and practice efforts in the field of criminal justice for decades. As described by Feucht and Tyson (2018, p. 182):

> …viewed over more than 50 years of evolving knowledge about context and implementation, one can see all the countervailing forces and competing priorities not as impediments to progress, but instead as a call to continuous growth and improvement. From this point of view, one can more see 50 years of evidence-building as an ongoing (if not consistent) effort, marked by resilience and persistence even through times of turbulence and falling resources.

As the field continues to grow and improve in its efforts to make the best use of available evidence, focused attention on the development of local implementation capacity would seem to be an essential area for investment. By prioritizing and enabling the development of competent local Implementation Teams, the judicial system will be able to deliver on its commitment to produce measurable and meaningful improvements for individuals on community supervision, their families, and the community.

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