

Strategically Planning For Implementation Of Evidence-Based Practices: Using Macro- and Micro-Strategies To Improve Success

By Donna L. Boone and
Kimberly Gentry Sperber

During the past decade, correctional agencies have experienced increasing pressure to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs). Consequently, many agencies often look to scientific literature to determine “what works” for the client populations they serve. Agencies use this literature to assess how well a specific EBP works by identifying the types of client outcomes achieved by the given practice. They then attempt to implement a chosen EBP, often without any guidance from science on what is required to successfully implement the new practice with fidelity for the long term.

Agencies not seeking assistance from implementation science literature are often confronted with varying definitions of implementation. Yet a common understanding of implementation within an organization is critical if that organization is to be successful. Such a framework for understanding the stages and general requirements of implementation has been laid out by Dean Fixsen and his colleagues in their synthesis of the implementation literature.¹ They outline six stages of the implementation of EBPs:

- Exploration and adoption;
- Program installation;
- Initial implementation;
- Full operation;
- Innovation; and
- Sustainability.

The focus of this article is on the first three stages of implementation identified by Fixsen et al., and the article uses experiences from the Virginia Department of Corrections to provide examples of strategies that can be employed in these stages.

The Virginia Experience

During the exploration and adoption stage of implementation, Fixsen et al. explain that an organization first looks to see what practices exist to address the client need of interest (e.g., recidivism reduction) and whether the identified

practices are feasible given the organization’s resources and infrastructure. Upon completion of this assessment, the organization chooses the practice(s) to be implemented and drafts a written implementation plan that outlines what must be done to address program installation and initial implementation. At the completion of this phase, the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) identified four new practices to implement: motivational interviewing by all probation officers, a standardized risk/needs assessment tool (the COMPAS), risk/need-driven case plan agreements and risk-based supervision caseload assignments.

Given the current urgency to stem the rising crime and incarceration rates, to avoid the staggering costs of new prison construction, and to produce better probation and parole supervision results, the up-front planning process is often truncated or sacrificed altogether as corrections officials move forward with their primary goals of simultaneously protecting the public and conserving taxpayer money. This failure to invest adequate time and human resources in an effective strategic planning process may occur for any number of reasons such as deeming it unnecessary, viewing it as a drain on limited resources, or viewing it as a luxury. Regardless, the outcome is the same — at a minimum, failure to adequately plan for implementation results in the inability of an organization to know what tasks should have been completed, by whom and by when. Consequently, the written implementation plan should clearly identify the goals to be achieved by the new practice, the tasks required to implement the new practice, responsible parties, deadlines and measures to be used as evidence that the plan was implemented. The implementation plan should also include strategies for routine monitoring and communication of the results of implementation rollout so that the organization can quickly identify when it is straying from the plan and engage in course corrections.

Once a general plan for implementation has been drafted, the work of program installation can begin. According to Fixsen et al., this stage involves identifying and accomplishing all tasks necessary before the new model or practice accepts its first client. This includes, but is not limited to,

securing appropriate funding, hiring new staff or reallocating existing staff (if needed), training staff, developing or revising policies and procedures, identifying and accommodating documentation requirements, securing required technology, and adjusting operational workflow.

The third stage, initial implementation, involves putting into practice the macro-level implementation plan, while simultaneously acknowledging that the implementation process is rarely static or smooth. This stage acknowledges that while front-end, macro-level strategic planning is necessary for successful implementation of EBPs, it is not sufficient. Consequently, this stage recognizes that implementing EBPs in live practice settings may be more organic in nature, as EBP adoption occurs in a piecemeal manner through a series of trials that determine what works, what needs revisions and what could benefit from additional resources.

A complementary approach to macro-level strategic planning is to use a “ground-up” or micro-level approach to strategic planning during the installation phase. The Virginia DOC did this by using pilot probation office sites to field-test the new EBPs, while gathering information from the field officers about what worked and what additions were needed to fully implement the new practices. Virginia accomplished this by slowly testing the new EBPs in four probation and parole district offices. During the program installation phase, probation officers were trained in motivational interviewing, a new risk/needs assessment instrument was field-tested and case-plan agreements were initiated. The deputy director of community corrections and many departmental administrators were supportive, advocating agencywide changes needed to sustain the EBPs. Offices were spruced up and expanded, supervision policies changed from a numbers-driven to a case-plan-driven system, and the overall tone in probation offices improved as probationers and officers communicated more effectively. There were early indicators of success as technical violation recommitments in EBP pilot sites dropped, while the rates in comparison group sites continued to rise.

During initial implementation, Virginia corrections officials learned that EBPs generated support and criticism simultaneously. As expected and encouraged, pilot site probation officers relayed the fissures in EBP implementation, including:

- Escalated turnover of veteran staff who were often replaced by officers new to the EBP and often new to probation work;
- Blurring of the traditional role of probation officers because they were encouraged to take on treatment duties;
- The view that the risk/needs instrument and case planning process were too time-consuming and unrelated to each other;
- Failure of university trainers to meet audience expectations and needs; and
- Caseload demands, once expected to decrease when low-risk offenders were handled administratively, still climbed with the additional EBP demands for supervising the remaining moderate- and high-risk probationers.

Responding to Staff Concerns Via A Concept Mapping Process

When identifying the line staff’s initial concerns about EBP implementation, the DOC was committed to also soliciting their possible solutions. However, when implementing a large, comprehensive, multifaceted project, leaders often find the traditional practice of using committee structure to be cumbersome and nonproductive. Concept mapping, an efficient method of collecting group suggestions and applying quantitative methods of ordering information into a priority list, provided a practical way to organize committee assignments and develop strategic plans. Agency officials used concept mapping to gather information from field agents about EBP infrastructure needs. Concept mapping is a nominal group process that includes quantitative methods for rating, ordering and prioritizing group input. The process, while simple in design, has multiple benefits, including information-gathering from all probation office staff, a workshop “product” that delineates all staff suggestions and quantitative ratings that enable data analysis.

A few weeks before a scheduled concept-mapping workshop, workshop leaders distributed the following focus question to probation office staff: “How can this unit become a full-fledged evidence-based practice district probation office?” They asked workshop enrollees to come to the session with five written answers to the question. Workshop leaders began the workshop by systematically asking for each person’s first suggestion. To ensure that each suggestion was accurate and clear, suggestions were recorded and projected so that the group could read the growing list. After the first round, leaders solicited the second suggestion on each person’s list. This orderly process continued until every suggestion was offered and recorded.

During the data-gathering process, leaders asked participants to abstain from giving evaluative comments about the suggestions. This resulted in a quick process (one and a half to two hours) for gathering and recording the information. After gathering the data, the suggestion list was printed and given to each participant. The participants were asked to rate each suggestion on dimensions of importance and feasibility. On a scale of 1 to 10, the suggestions were rated from very important and very feasible (10) to not important and not feasible (1).

After the workshop ended, researchers calculated the mean scores and standard deviations for the aggregate importance and feasibility ratings for each suggestion. Researchers also sorted the suggestion list two ways: by focus areas (training initiatives, policy issues, resource issues, etc.) and by the three EBP dimensions (collaboration, organizational development and EBP skills). Another analysis calculated a “frustration index,” which identified suggestions with a wide spread between the mean importance score and the mean feasibility score. In other words, the suggestion was rated as very important with a corresponding low feasibility score, which indicated the officers’ beliefs that the initiative had little chance of being achieved.

By gathering information about the perceptions of EBP infrastructure needs directly from probation officers, DOC officials received a detailed checklist to guide the agency’s EBP implementation. Beyond the strategic planning aspects

of concept mapping, field staff alerted headquarters staff about the areas that required assistance from them. This included resource allocation, policy changes, and judicial and community collaboration (see Table 1 for a truncated sample of initiatives and their importance ratings). With concern about high staff turnover in the EBP pilot sites, DOC officials also learned what measures might help retain seasoned EBP staff. These measures included salary increases and recognition for higher skill levels, flexible work schedules, and clearer role and duty definitions. Staff also delineated offender needs such as resources for incentives, adequate treatment referral resources, community support systems and emergency housing. Finally, staff input suggested that collaboration with critical criminal justice and community partners, particularly judges and other parole districts, also needed urgent attention. Because DOC administrators were able to quickly identify staff concerns and suggest solutions, some policy suggestions occurred almost immediately after DOC administrators were aware of the field's needs (e.g., changing from numbers-driven to plan-driven supervision standards).

Lessons Learned

All planning is subject to a certain amount of conjecture until it is implemented in the field. When practices and tools are field-tested, their strengths and weaknesses become apparent. Testing out various approaches can result in field-friendly tools and practices and allows the line staff to become the experts and architects of the EBP system. Probation staff interact directly with offenders and most directly impact the fidelity of EBP implementation. Therefore, "bottom-up" strategic planning is most appropriate in designing EBP infrastructure-need plans that have a high probability of success. For the Virginia DOC, the bottom-up strategic planning process had four major advantages:

- It ensured that the needs, issues and concerns of individual criminal justice practitioners were heard by policymakers;
- It resulted in an implementation plan that fit specific local needs;
- It alerted policymakers to EBP obstacles and assisted practitioners in surmounting difficulties; and
- It increased local buy-in and ownership of the EBP implementation plan, which is likely to produce better results than an "imposed" plan.

In summary, many organizations are investing a great deal of time and energy into implementing EBPs. Although these agencies often seek out and use existing research to guide them in their choice of EBPs, they rely less on research to guide them in their implementation efforts. While this article by no means serves as a summary of implementation science and its application to criminal justice, it does illustrate the necessity for an organization to identify what is meant by the term implementation. Regardless of whether an organization chooses to use the Fixsen et al. framework for conceptualizing implementation, what is clear is that an organization must at least have a rudimentary understanding that implementation is not a one-time event (i.e., the idea that staff training takes place and implementation is done). Rather, implementation is a dynamic and long-term process that requires a commensurate organizational commitment, and inclusion of both macro- and micro-level strategies and data to result in success.

Table 1. Sample of Suggested Initiatives for Full EBP Implementation

Suggested Initiative	Importance Mean Scores
Revise staff compensation tier system to reward required EBP skills and duties	9.25
Establish in-house capacity for needed offender services	8.92
Train upper management in motivational interviewing and other EBP training (to engender staff support)	8.75
Cultivate local resources (businesses, churches, etc.) to provide offender support	8.75
Continue to develop and expand the community outreach network	8.58
Provide adequate funding for offender treatment and service resources	8.58
Develop an adequate treatment/service referral system to meet offenders' needs	8.50
Increase funding for ancillary services for offenders (education, job placement, etc.)	8.50
Develop referral processes that are time- and energy-efficient	8.50
Establish in-house offender support systems (thinking errors, cognitive community, etc.)	8.50
Increase communication and cooperation between probation and treatment providers	8.42
Develop and deliver EBP training to criminal justice and treatment professionals at the local level	8.42
Expand funding and resources for offender emergency housing	8.33
Develop effective programs to address anti-social personality and low self-control	8.00
Establish smaller probation caseloads (allowing for increased time with each offender)	7.92
Provide bus tokens for offenders	7.92
Collaborate with judges, parole board and other districts to get appropriate people off probation	7.83
Establish ongoing training for staff development of EBP skills	7.75
Conduct treatment audits and outcome evaluations of EBP impact	7.70
Establish a peer support system during the prison-to-community transition phase	7.17

ENDNOTE

¹ Fixsen, D., S. Naoom, K. Blase, R. Friedman and F. Wallace. 2005. *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, Fla.: University of South Florida.

Donna L. Boone, Ph.D., is the evaluation supervisor at the Virginia Department of Corrections. Kimberly Gentry Sperber, Ph.D., is the chief research officer at Talbert House, a nonprofit, community-based agency that creates evidence-based programs to solve social problems, in Cincinnati.