

NCIC: Combined Meta-Analysis

Vision: What's the problem? What Needs to Change?

Can the agency give an “elevator speech” on what they wish to change, and how? As simple as this sounds, an elevator speech can only be created when all parties have a basic agreement about what the project looks like, and are able to articulate it in similar ways. A project without a clear picture of what it wishes to change can indicate a lack of agreement among parties that are developing the project, and/or further need to specify what, and how to assess, anticipated changes.

Does the project link to changed practices and child/family outcomes? It is important that staff designing and implementing a project understand and are able to describe the ultimate impact of the project on families and children. Not being able to do this is a red flag. A project is not an end to itself, but exists in the context of a problem to be solved regarding how the agency serves children and their families.

Does the project build upon previous work, and link with other initiatives? Projects that build on previous work and implementation experience may be in a stronger position to move forward. In addition, such projects may be better able to withstand changes in leadership. Alignment and linkage with other initiatives can strengthen a project and enhance sustainability.

Commitment: Who wants the change, and how badly do they want it?

Who has recognized the need for change... and who has not? Systems maintain themselves. Where projects are successful, the system has already recognized the need to change; the work is related to the core concerns of the agency. What is driving that change and why now? Who might be ambivalent, or opposed to the change? *Are there are project champions, and who are they?* Champions may be at the executive level, but not always. Mid-level managers who are savvy enough to use their authority can move things forward.

Is the work a priority of executive leadership? Executive leadership prioritizes, or does not prioritize, the project. Projects are feasible when they are linked to Executive leadership's core concerns, and when leadership commits the resources necessary to embed and sustain new practices. A good match between leadership's skill set and the focus of the project can strengthen.

Is the work connected to mid-Level management Concerns? Mid-level managers will be the ones who hold supervisors accountable; without their buy-in the project will not go further than central office. Effective mid-level managers can champion and communicate about the initiative with the rest of the agency, enabling an initiative to survive and even prosper during changes in administration. When leadership changes, it is important that mid-level management obtain the buy-in of new leadership by connecting project work to executive concerns.

Is there involvement of the front line/end user? The willingness of an agency to involve front end users in the design and implementation of a change initiative is critical. Field Operations need to be sufficiently involved, relying on program staff only will impede being able to drop the initiative down to the field level. There is a need for penetration, which means that a certain number of people need to be involved.

Is there a willingness and ability to evaluate changes? Is the agency willing and able to measure changes at a practice and family/child outcome level? When there are tangible practice changes which link to defined child/family outcomes and there is a desire to measure them, a project shows that there is an expectation of real, measurable changes, and that leadership is willing to commit to measuring these changes.

Agency Culture and Capacity

Is there a “visionary” and a “manager”? Without a strong vision, the project suffers from lack of commitment. Without strong management, it may be difficult to maintain the vision/

Is there a basic project management capacity? Are the basics of project management there? Does the state know how to develop a work plan?

Is there effective decision making? Can the project team take in information and move forward to make decisions? Or are discussions circular, with hashing and rehashing? How do they interpret information provided and act upon it?

Does the organization have the ability to self-reflect? Self-awareness and organizational awareness allow teams to make systems changes by acknowledging both strengths and challenges in their organization. Including a “resident skeptic” who can ask tough questions can push a team to tackle issues which they might be reluctant to address.

How is communication with internal and external stakeholders? Limited communication within the agency can obstruct engagement of necessary internal stakeholders, which can weaken and derail initiatives. Restricted communication with those outside the agency makes it difficult to tell what is going on behind the scenes. This can impede tracking and adjusting of project activities.

Can the organization partner with external stakeholders? The long term, intensive work with NCIC demands a working relationship, which involves unearthing and solving adaptive as well as technical issues. The state or tribe needs the ability and/or desire to work in partnership.

What does previous history show? What has worked well before, and what has not? Understanding how the agency typically drives initiatives through, what has been successful, and what hasn't helps in understanding a state's culture and experience in attempting prior change initiatives.

Is there an ability to sustain initiatives? Some states can drive specific initiatives, but they do not sustain the initiative. While a project can be completed successfully, the system is not changed or enhanced. While challenging, the issue of sustainability should be addressed early on.

Are foundational pieces necessary for the project present, and adequate? A project may read well on paper, yet if foundational pieces are not solid it will block project development and implementation.

What is the Agency's Data/Quality Assurance Capacity? Some states use data effectively to guide and drive change initiatives. Other states collect data, but don't use it to inform and drive change initiatives.

Is the project feasible at this time? Timing is an essential component. When is there enough capacity been built to address the issue? When is it politically reasonable to do so?

How should the Change Be Made: Design Period

Has enough time been allotted for good design – and to build relationships? A number of important activities occur concurrently during the design phase. Strong working relationships within a jurisdiction's team and with NCIC should be developed. A longer design phase allows NCIC to observe the organizational culture, and to diagnose and understand why an agency is in its current state. Knowledge of the organizational culture and effective relationships facilitate the coaching role which NCIC can play. Having an appropriate amount of design time supports a smoother transition into the installation and implementation of project activities. This diagnostic period should include an assessment of risk to the agency, so that planning can help to mitigate these risks.

What are the Adaptive Challenges in implementing this initiative? Adaptive issues need to be identified early, and require ongoing attention. Projects that are still struggling with adaptive issues – where there is insufficient agreement or buy-in on what specific practice changes should be focused on – are less likely to be sustained; evaluations are unclear because practice changes are unclear.

Are there adequate resources, including a project coordinator? We recommend a project coordinator as a necessary structural component for implementation. Successful projects require help to link different pieces, and to generally provide on the ground support that is necessary to keep the work going.

Is there a project team with broad representation to guide the work? Creation of a cross-functional project team during the design phase is critical. Systemic change destabilizes the system. It is an inherently challenging process because it requires things to be done differently. It requires a project team; one person cannot carry the entire burden for charging forward to destabilize the system. In the design phase the cross-functional project team helps ensure that the project is designed in an inclusive way that will increase buy-in, and ensure that the design is responsive to the concerns of stakeholders.

Has the impact of the project's timeframe been considered as a design element? The timeframe will vary by the objective and scope, and by agency context. Timeframes need to be long enough to allow the work to be done, yet short enough to foster importance and momentum. Timeframes can be used strategically. Condensed timelines may help convey that the project is an agency priority and can help states transition from design to implementation. Slowing down a project can allow sufficient time to reach out to stakeholders and expand and enhance leadership.

Are there strategies to develop champions? In design, include strategies to engage internal stakeholders so that champions can develop in the organization. However, engagement for engagement's sake is not enough. It can devolve into endless processes unless the engagement serves to further the focus on achieving a clearly articulated goal which is specific to making practice changes linked to improving child and family outcomes.

What is the scope of the intervention, and why? Targeted interventions are indicated when the change is more experimental and/or where it makes sense to pilot and refine the design and implementation strategy before taking it to scale.

What are the most appropriate strategies? We have not observed universally effective strategies across our projects. What makes a strategy successful is the strength of the link between a strategy to the clarity of what the project is trying to achieve, and the fit of the strategy to agency culture.

Making the Change: Implementation

How can the cross-functional team support implementation? During implementation, cross-functional project teams help make sure that the project is linking to different parts of the agency and community. Teams can also communicate with their constituents about the project, which helps improve overall messaging and communication

What competency based strategies will be needed to implement? Coaching can be an effective strategy, but like other competency based strategies, effectiveness is linked to training and to clarity of practice outcomes. Coaching must quickly follow training; adult learning requires quick application of new skills that are to be coached. Practices that are to be changed must be specific enough to be coached to; getting to this level of specificity requires tackling adaptive challenges; systemic pressures that contribute to the pre-existing process and outcomes need to be identified and addressed.

How will leadership and staff continue to be involved? Sustaining change is ensuring the system doesn't revert back to what it was. It requires continuing involvement of staff and leadership; the project can't end, it's a process.

How can succession planning be embedded in implementation? Paying attention to the people will be moving up through the organization is important. How do you duplicate visionaries throughout the state? How do you plant seeds to sustain the next tier, and how do you cultivate the people behind them?

How can structures be built for ongoing self-examination? For a system that is willing to engage in change, structures need to be created to allow the process of reflection and decision making through some kind of ongoing process.

How can the project connect into pre-existing systems? This can include processes such as the CFSR, and organizational structures such as CQI, training, policy, performance systems, and hiring. Embedding practices into the agency requires getting into the procedures and institutionalizing changes to enhance sustainability.

How can internal and external communication be enhanced? Communication keeps internal stakeholders engaged. Communication with external stakeholders can build allies who can support the changes if there are future threats.

Does the time frame for implementation match what the literature suggests? Implementation literature suggests a 4-5 year timeframe. After design and implementation, there needs to be a maintenance plan.

How can evaluation be used to embed the initiative into the agency? We have observed connections between adaptive challenges, evaluation, and sustainability. An agency that truly wants an evaluation has strong commitment to and clarity around what it will accomplish, and will evaluate what they are doing as much as they can. Strong projects have strengthened, lengthened, and embedded project evaluations. There's a difference between evaluating the project and its processes, and evaluating the system and outcomes a project is designed to change. While projects and their evaluations are too short to see long term child/family outcomes; within the project period the best evaluations have been able to assess practice changes. However, ultimately, the state, tribe and field want to know – are the activities we are doing getting to the child and family outcomes? Who will look at these outcomes in the future? One effective strategy is to create an outcomes evaluation that is linked to the CQI systems.