

Chapter 22

Implementation—The Achilles Heel of Evidence-Based Practices

The field of community corrections has been dabbling at the edges of significant organizational change now for a little more than a decade. Since the emergence of the *what works* research in the early to mid-1990s, managers and executives have talked about and attended workshops on what works, and some have even attempted to implement programs based on this body of research. Relabeled evidence-based practices (EBP) just after the turn of the millennium, this research and the programs based on it still maintain a significant hold on the attention of probation and parole executives and managers.

Unfortunately, the fascination that many have with EBP has not translated into action commensurate with the rhetoric. Far too few agencies have been successful at implementing EBP in probation and parole. As a result, we have but a handful of examples we can point to in order to demonstrate that EBP works in community corrections and that it reduces crime committed by persons under supervision in the community.

This lack of evidence concerns me a great deal. I believe that we have a limited window of opportunity to implement EBP and demonstrate its impact. As with so many other program innovations, management fads, and political trends, the fascination with EBP and the opportunity that it provides will not last forever. As the word gets out about EBP and its tremendous potential for reducing the risk of reoffending, expectations begin to build for an evidence-based future:

- Crime by probationers and parolees will decline;
- Drug use will decrease;
- Employment and school attendance will increase;
- Criminogenic risk factors of all types will be mitigated; and
- Law-abiding, prosocial behavior will replace criminal and delinquent acts.

I believe that all of these outcomes can happen, if we have widespread, high-quality implementation of EBP in adult and juvenile probation and parole agencies across the country. Unfortunately, we have not seen such widespread adoption of EBP.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The excitement and expectations generated by EBP have been good for community corrections. We have been able to put aside the crippling (and mistaken) notion

that when it comes to changing offender behavior, nothing works. The demise of the rehabilitative ideal (Allen, 1981) contributed to a two-decade-long crisis of identity and mission in community corrections. The core ideology of helping offenders to change was ripped away, because programs and strategies to facilitate offender rehabilitation supposedly did not work. We struggled to find our place in the “get tough; lock ‘em up” era. With extensive research to support it, EBP has breathed new life into correctional treatment and once again given probation and parole a viable and vital mission.

The excitement surrounding EBP has a limited shelf life, however. The expectations created (by us and others) must soon be met with empirical evidence about results. Absent widespread evidence that we have implemented EBP and that it is producing positive results, disillusionment will set in, and the window of opportunity will slam shut. Policymakers, stakeholders, constituents, and even staff will say, “Where’s the beef?” Without the “beef” (i.e., tangible results), EBP will be tossed onto the trash heap of failed initiatives and programs.

The tragedy of this scenario is that it does not need to happen: EBP should not be relegated to the public policy trash heap as ineffective. The empirical evidence to the contrary is significant and substantial. Community corrections executives and managers need to embrace EBP and implement programs and services on a much larger scale. It is time to match the rhetoric with results!

WHY ISN'T EBP THE STANDARD PRACTICE?

Why EBP is not standard operating procedure is a complex question, with several possible answers:

Some community corrections personnel have lingering political and policy questions about EBP. In some jurisdictions, there are still individuals in positions of authority and influence who want to lock everyone up. In such places, is it safe to embrace offender behavior change as an agency goal? Changing offender behavior is a difficult challenge to meet, and it is understandable that one might be reluctant to embrace a model that is in direct conflict with prevailing sentiment. Still, the evidence is compelling that we can reduce recidivism by offenders in the community.

Some in the field remain skeptical that any effort at rehabilitation can work. High-profile efforts like New York’s Project Greenlight (Wilson & Davies, 2006), in which parolees in the program had higher recidivism rates than the control group that got no treatment, provide fuel for these skeptics. Others do not place much faith in research, preferring instead to be guided by their own experience (an approach sometimes referred to as practice-based evidence).

Fortunately, many in leadership positions in community corrections agree that EBP is the right path and accept the evidence that programs based on this research do in fact work. Having reached these conclusions, they now face the biggest challenge of EBP: implementation of EBP programs in their agencies.

THE IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGE

“Implementation” is a word that is tossed around very cavalierly in our field (and in many others as well). From the casual references, one would think that designing

(or finding) an evidence-based program is the bulk of the work and that implementation is a relatively minor matter. In fact, it is the reverse. In their synthesis of implementation research, scholars at the National Implementation Research Network concluded that “implementation is a decidedly complex endeavor, more complex than the policies, programs, procedures, techniques, or technologies that are the subject of the implementation efforts” (Fixsen et al., 2005, p. 2). To compound the problem, the implementation researchers note that the science relating to implementation lags far behind that of developing and testing evidence-based practices (Fixsen et al., 2005). Most of the knowledge from implementation research addresses the early stages: exploration and early implementation. Much more needs to be learned about sustaining implementation for the long term.

Implementation is critical because new programs, EBP or otherwise, are not, to use a contemporary electronics term, “plug and play.” Unlike my computer, which recognizes whatever device I plug into the USB port, organizations need a great deal of help recognizing and figuring out how to run these new programs. As Joan Petersilia (1990) noted, “ideas embodied in innovative social programs are not self-executing. It is now well-recognized that implementing change is neither an easy nor an entirely predictable process” (p. 129). It involves much more than just finding a “model” program and adopting it for your agency.

To meet the implementation challenge, it is useful to understand exactly what it entails. Implementation is defined as “[a] series of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions” (Fixsen et al., 2005, p. 5). It is a purposeful process, one that will result in changes in professional behavior of staff, in organizational structure and culture, and in relationships to clients, stakeholders, and system partners (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Implementation of EBP is a planned organizational change. Successful organizational change efforts have two essential components. The first is a proven idea or concept that will be the focus of the change. In this discussion, I refer to this component as the intervention. EBP in community corrections are interventions that have proven their ability to produce the desired results: reduced recidivism. The second component is the implementation of the intervention. Both components are essential to success. One without the other is insufficient (Fixsen et al., 2005). As a review of juvenile EBP implementation noted, “A sound program will not produce the desired results if it is implemented poorly” (Mihalic, Irwin, Fagan, Ballard, & Elliott, 2004, p. 1).

Combining the two key components with a simple rating of effective or ineffective provides a useful way of displaying the results of planned change efforts, as Figure 22.1 illustrates. Planned change efforts can be assigned to one of four cells, based on the rating of the two components. For example, a program that had a good design but was poorly implemented would fall into Cell 1, “Try Again.” In such a situation, efforts should be focused on improving the implementation to improve the overall outcome. A program like New York’s Project Greenlight would fall into Cell 1 (Wilson & Davies, 2006). Cell 2 is where a program with a good design and good implementation would fall. An example of such a program would be the Intensive Supervision Program operated by Probation Services in New Jersey (Pearson, 1987).

Cell 3, “Forget About It,” is where programs with poor design and poor implementation go. The Scared Straight program operated in New Jersey’s Rahway State Prison is one example of such a program. Not only was the design of trying to scare

Figure 22.1
Planned Change Outcomes

Intervention	<i>Effective</i>	#1 Try Again	#2 Success
	<i>Ineffective</i>	#3 Forget About It	#4 Learned Something
		<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>Effective</i>
	Implementation		

juveniles out of offending ineffective, but there was also no control over what types of juveniles were sent to the program. The results showed that not only did Scared Straight not reduce delinquency, but in some cases it increased delinquency (Finckenauer, 1981). Cell 4 holds programs like boot camps. As a result of the attention of the federal government to these programs in the 1990s, a great deal of research was done on them. Research found that in boot camps, implementation was very good overall. Boot camps were not effective in reducing incarceration or in reducing recidivism, however (MacKenzie, 2006). From such results, we can add to our knowledge base about effective programs, so Cell 4 is labeled “Learned Something.”

FIGURING OUT WHAT WORKS

There is a great deal of information to help in identifying a “good” intervention. The literature on effective programs is substantial, perhaps even a bit overwhelming, but there are plenty of choices and people who can help. Issues to be considered include:

- Matching the offenders and their needs to the program;
- Matching the program to the resources available; and
- Ensuring that staff have or can acquire the capabilities and skills to execute the program faithfully.

The articles and training on EPB in corrections have proliferated over the last decade and have raised the awareness of probation and parole practitioners, enabling them to better sort through the myriad issues and information available.

Implementation is another matter. The “profile” of implementation as a critical issue in organizational change has not risen to the level of information about EBP pro-

grams. Paul Gendreau and his colleagues have noted that the extensive literature on technology transfer, another term for implementation of new programs, has been largely ignored in the corrections literature (Gendreau, Goggin, & Smith, 2001). As a result, practitioners are not as familiar with the terminology, concepts, and strategies in this field. By contrast, technology transfer has been addressed in some depth in the substance abuse treatment literature (Burrell, 2005). Perhaps we can learn some lessons from this and other fields.

COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

While the subject of implementation has not been explored extensively in community corrections, it is not that difficult to locate relevant literature. What follows is a summary of the key components of successful implementation, organized by major categories.

Leadership

All studies of implementation emphasize the importance of effective leadership. There must be visible commitment to the new program from the top of the organization. The involvement of leaders must extend beyond the normal, day-to-day activities of management and include regular involvement of the organization's leaders in the implementation process. It is essential that the agency leadership fully understand the new program and be able to discuss and defend it effectively. Leaders must be flexible, adaptable, and open to change. It is a given that the organization and its people will have to change as part of the implementation, and the leader must accept that inevitability and set the example. Leaders must be able to motivate staff and forge a shared vision.

Environmental Factors

The new program will not be placed in a vacuum. Attention must be paid to the environment in which implementation will occur. "Put simply, failing to adapt to the challenges of the local context is a common cause of failure" (Berman, Bowen, & Mansky, 2007, p. 9). There must be a fit between the intervention and the agency. The intervention must meet a real need in the agency. Implementation must be feasible: the organization must be ready for change and have the capability to implement change. The agency should be stable—not in the midst of a crisis or other disruption. The rate of staff turnover should be low. There should be support from key stakeholders and constituents. Justice system partners should be alerted and involved to the extent that the program involves their operations or staff. These and many other environmental factors should be monitored throughout the implementation period, because these factors are dynamic and subject to change.

Staff

In community corrections, staff members are the intervention. They provide the services to the offenders, the courts, and the community. As a result, they are a criti-

cal component of implementation. There must be enough staff, with the proper skills, experience, and credentials. They must have a manageable workload, so that they have enough time to deliver the intervention. It is important to build what Harris and Smith (1996) call “street level commitment” among the line personnel (p. 210). Building this kind of commitment can be done through:

- Training;
- Involvement in the design and development of the program and policies;
- Opportunities to discuss both the program and the implementation; and
- Ongoing feedback on performance.

Staff must have the chance to make the intervention their own; they cannot effectively be coerced. Management should find incentives to encourage staff to maintain the integrity of the intervention. It is helpful for staff to have regular access to the change agent and to technical assistance or training as needed. Such access will help to increase their comfort level and competence, leading to greater buy-in and support.

Training and Technical Assistance

Because the implementation of a new intervention will require changes in the professional behavior of staff, training is essential. Well-trained staff members are more likely to implement the intervention fully, with greater fidelity to the design, and greater fidelity produces better outcomes (Mihalic et al., 2004). It is important to offer “booster” training for staff after the initial training, to strengthen skills and reinforce learning (Sachwald & Eley, 2007, p. 32). Training should be followed by ongoing monitoring, supervision, coaching, and support. The organization must provide the infrastructure for this training, supervision, coaching, and feedback. In all likelihood, the extent of these activities during implementation will be greater than in normal operations, and the workload of supervisors must reflect these additional responsibilities. Training should not be limited to line officers. The presence of managers and executives at the training sessions is significant. It sends a powerful message of support, increases their understanding of the intervention, and enables the administration to better understand and support the implementation at all levels of the agency. Technical assistance should be available from subject-matter experts, such as academics, evaluators, or others with specialized and detailed knowledge of the intervention and implementation. Answering staff members’ questions and explaining concepts that they are curious about will raise their comfort levels, increase their competence, and enhance the likelihood of compliance with the requirements of the intervention.

Communication

Communication should be the easiest component to address, but in practice it may be the hardest. Noted change expert John Kotter (1996) says that managers undercommunicate about change, often to a significant degree. It is essential that all staff be informed about what is going to happen in the agency, before the process begins. This communication must take place before any training occurs, to give staff the con-

text for the new skills that they will be learning. Orientation sessions should be conducted, introducing the initiative, describing the plans, reviewing key elements of the program, exploring staff members' roles and any changes in their duties, and allowing staff the opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns. Once the program is under way, managers should provide regular feedback on the progress of implementation and overall outcomes. Note that all of these steps must be taken in addition to day-to-day operations, further stressing the system and those who manage it.

Change Agent

The implementation should be led by a change agent, a project director with the authority to make things happen. The lines of authority and accountability should be clear; there should be no question about who is in charge of the implementation. The change agent must have strong support from the top, intimate knowledge of the organization and the program, professional credibility, and, ideally, prior success at managing change. The change agent should also have a team that is broadly representative of the agency. The team should consist of a vertical slice of the organization, with representation from all levels (management, supervisors, line officers, and support staff). Change is led most effectively by a team with special authority, working outside the day-to-day management structure (National Implementation Network, 2006).

Integration

The intervention must be integrated into the fabric of the agency if it is to survive and thrive in the long term. Programs that are merely “tacked on” to an agency run the risk of being targeted when budgets tighten, or of being neglected once the initial thrill of implementation has given way to the more mundane tasks of daily operations. Once the special status of the program erodes, it becomes harder to keep staff focused on maintaining the integrity of the model and the implementation. Once the focus is lost, outcomes will suffer. It is optimal that the impetus for the change come from within, rather than be imposed from the outside. Agencies have greater ownership of internally driven change. The intervention should have clear goals and objectives, and those should be closely aligned with the organization's goals and objectives.

Resources

It is foolhardy to launch a change effort without adequate resources. A project launched under those circumstances is doomed from the start. It is wiser either to postpone implementation until sufficient resources can be obtained or to opt out altogether. Insufficient resources will cause compromises to be made, in either the program design or the implementation or both. Compromising design or implementation is a clear recipe for disappointment at best and outright failure at worst. Because we are dealing with criminal offenders and trying to change their offending behaviors, failure means new crimes—and new victims. In some instances, the poor performance of a program not only fails to reduce reoffending, it increases it (Wilson & Davies, 2006). It is unconscionable to proceed with implementation without adequate resources.

Time

Organizational change takes time. It cannot be rushed or fast-tracked. While the specific time frames may vary based on the scope of the change and the agency's readiness for change, experts agree that it will take between two and four years for major change to take hold and survive in an agency (National Implementation Network, 2006). The experience of two states with implementation of EBP bears this out. Both Connecticut and Maryland spent five to six years at implementation, and both produced solid results (Fox, Bantley, & Roscoe, 2005; Taxman, Yancey, & Bilanin, 2006).

Fidelity

While last in the list of components, fidelity may be the most important. Fidelity refers to adherence to the program design. In other words, staff members who are delivering the intervention on the ground should be following the policies, procedures, and requirements called for in the program model. Fidelity means, in the words of Harris and Smith (1996), that "the enacted design is the same as the conceptualized design" (p. 184). Fidelity is a challenge, because myriad pressures are brought to bear when a model program is being implemented. New York's Project Greenlight is a good example, in which modifications were made to a sound EBP design as a result of fiscal, organizational, and administrative pressures (Wilson, 2007). As a result, the Greenlight program as delivered departed significantly from the original concept. As noted earlier, the results showed increased, not reduced, recidivism. A cursory review of this program could lead one to say that the EBP model does not work. In reality, one cannot draw that conclusion because the EBP model was not implemented with fidelity in Project Greenlight. Instead, one can accurately conclude that the program was poorly implemented.

EXPLORING THE DOMAINS OF FIDELITY

The EBP research is clear that fidelity should be a major concern when replicating programs in an agency. It is natural to expect that a well-researched and successful program will produce similar results if replicated in another location. That expectation can be met only if the model program is implemented with a high degree of fidelity to the original design, however.

When we start to explore this concept of fidelity, several additional dimensions emerge beyond compliance with the program model. I have labeled these the four domains of fidelity (see Figure 22.2). Executives and managers in charge of planned change efforts must pay attention to all four domains.

The first domain is the program design/adoption. We must be sure that the model is evidence based and incorporates all of the key principles of the model. In other words, the program model should have a high degree of fidelity to the EBP model. To borrow a phrase from the business world, we must practice "due diligence" when we start looking for an EBP program to meet a local need. One criticism of Project Greenlight is that the Reasoning and Rehabilitation program may not have been examined closely enough from the cultural perspective. Some question whether the

Figure 22.2
The Four Domains of Fidelity

	Design/Adoption	Execution
Intervention Program/Strategy	Domain #1	Domain #2
Implementation Strategy/Plan	Domain #3	Domain #4

program is suited to the urban minority offender population that filled Project Greenlight (Wilson & Davies, 2006, p. 329).

The second domain has to do with maintaining that program design fidelity during implementation. The pressures of implementation cannot be allowed to distort the model. Again, Project Greenlight is illustrative. The program stopped using the Level of Service Inventory–Revised assessment instrument and fundamentally modified the Reasoning and Rehabilitation cognitive behavioral program. These are key elements of an EBP model, and they were not maintained as required by the program design. Implementation researchers repeatedly caution not to change the program, but rather to look at how the organization might be modified to accommodate the model program (National Implementation Network, 2006).

The third domain is the implementation design. A comprehensive plan covering all of the components discussed above must be developed. Detailed tasks, time frames, and responsible parties must be identified. Failing to plan out a complex process such as organizational change invites disaster. There are so many moving parts and critical factors that a comprehensive plan is essential to ensure that they all work in concert. Implementation research can help the chances of success, but only if we incorporate available knowledge about effective implementation—another category of *what works* research.

The fourth domain is the integrity of the implementation process. The execution of the implementation plan must have fidelity as well. All of the tasks must be performed in the proper sequence and at the proper level. Without implementation fidelity, we cannot be sure that our program model has been fully installed in the agency. Our ability to determine the impact of the intervention will be compromised. With the cost, in both financial and human terms, of organizational change, we need to be able to assess the impact of the change.

The third and fourth domains represent a less well explored aspect of fidelity in the context of EBP in community corrections. But, as should be clear, it is a critical aspect. As Gendreau, Goggin, and Smith (1999) note, “The effectiveness of any state-of-the-art assessment and treatment protocol is diminished, however, if careful attention is not paid as to how the programs are implemented in the first place” (p. 180).

BIG INVESTMENT, HUGE RETURNS

It is clear that EBP holds great potential for transforming the work and the outcomes of probation and parole. We need to redouble our efforts to achieve that potential. The challenge is implementation. While implementation is hard work, it is something that will, in the long run, be worth the effort. As Don Andrews (2009) recently noted, EBP “may continue to be underutilized and of reduced value if the problems of implementation and integrity are not better addressed” (p. 44). We should not allow EBP to be underutilized and its value reduced. Too much is at stake.

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