

Lessons Learned: Planning and Implementation of an Evidence-Based Practice in the Real World of Corrections (A Practitioner's Guide)

(Published in the Winter 2009 edition of *Perspectives*, the journal of the American Probation and Parole Association)

Modern correctional practice is changing. It must. Faced with skyrocketing offender populations during the past two decades (BJS, 2006), much of it due to recidivism (Langan and Levin, 2002), and with correctional expenditures rising as well (BJS, 2005), leaders of correctional agencies are looking for better ways to address a growing array of complex challenges. In the process, they have been asking themselves some difficult questions:

- What can be done to stem the tide of offenders recycling through our correctional systems?
- How can the effectiveness of correctional interventions be enhanced, while addressing the systemic stress created by a rising correctional population?
- How can better levels of public safety be achieved, given the above-noted challenges?

These are questions I began asking myself about five years ago, as I was promoted into the chief's job in a medium-sized probation and parole office in Virginia, one where I had spent nearly my entire professional career. Shortly after stepping into my new role, I began harboring serious doubts as to the long-term efficacy of the correctional model under which we operated. Something was missing. There was no doubt that my officers worked hard, with a strong commitment to their chosen profession, but whatever we did or how hard we worked, it seemed that problems grew faster than our solutions. Overwhelming workloads left my staff drained, exhausted and frustrated. It felt like we were beating our heads against a wall.

It was disheartening to see so many of the felons we supervised recycle through the correctional system time and time again, often the result of predictable and well-documented patterns of behavior. Why did people keep coming back into the system? What was lacking in our approach? Why weren't the offenders "getting it"? Wouldn't we all be safer in the long run if we could figure out how to reduce their chances of returning to the correctional system?

In our quest to find answers, my colleagues and I discovered that there are many things we can do to help offenders "get it", to take charge of and responsibility for building a better future for themselves and their families. Two decades of correctional research has coalesced around a set of principles and practices that, if implemented with skill, commitment, energy and fidelity, can

reduce recidivism (Bogue, et al, 2004). These so-called evidence-based practices, emerging from the “What Works” correctional literature, suggest that a specific set of risk reduction strategies can improve long-term correctional efficacy (Taxman, et al., 2004).

In my probation district, we had become accustomed over the years to a risk control emphasis. We employed a contact-driven supervision strategy, one that provided increasingly severe (often punitive) sanctions to address noncompliance. These external controls were moderately effective in the short term. However, they overlooked a simple truth identified in the research: Lasting change in human behavior is an internal, cognitive process, driven not so much by threat of punishment as by the level of intrinsic motivation one generates to change for the better (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). That certainly would explain why we kept seeing the same offenders time and time again. We just weren’t very successful in changing them from the outside in, and they were unable to generate sufficient motivation to make the internal changes necessary for their own long-term success. Prisons and jails were filling up with examples of this simple truth.

As we learned more, the challenge of leading my office, and to a certain extent the larger criminal justice system, toward this new intrinsic change model became increasingly apparent. Much of the shift had to be attitudinal. I had come up through the ranks believing that if I told offenders what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and what would happen to them if they didn’t, that should serve as sufficient motivation for them to toe the line and change. It rarely happened, and if it did, it was not for long. It occurred to me that our correctional role might be too narrowly defined.

Instead, what if we considered ourselves as both authority figures and interventionists, as change agents, trained and skilled in helping offenders find and maintain the insight and motivation necessary to improve their lives in real, measurable, lasting ways? What if we did a better job of assessing their crime-producing issues and accurately interpreting their unique pathways to crime? What if we became more adept at collaborating with others in the community to implement a coordinated intervention plan, one that actually had a positive impact on thinking and behavior? What if we carefully measured what our officers did and how it worked, got rid of the stuff that had little value and beefed up those practices and programs that showed positive results? Over time, would these changes improve our correctional outcomes? The research suggested that it would, but it wouldn’t be quick or easy.

Once we understood what the research was telling us, “business as usual” was no longer an option. Yet, we had no idea what we were doing, or even where to start. No practical, step-by-step road map for an evidence-based implementation process existed. There were a handful of implementation efforts already underway from which lessons could be learned, but how broadly could those lessons be generalized? We had no clue. So, with our community partners, we jumped headfirst into murky evidence-based waters, along with several other jurisdictions in Virginia as pilot sites in the implementation of an EBP model. Needless to say, we made quite a

few mistakes along the way. We learned from them, as well as our successes. The following are some of those lessons learned.

First, a caveat: This is not intended as a scholarly work. It is an experiential piece. What worked in my office might not work in yours, and vice versa. Every work setting will have its own starting point and its own existing set of strengths and challenges from the outset. Start where you are, not where you think you should be, or where you would like to be. There is never a good time to start a change process of this magnitude, especially in turbulent, resource-scarce times. Start anyway. Go as fast or as slowly as your situation dictates. Understand that, once you start, nothing will ever be the same.

Planning, Organizational Readiness and Strategic Alignment

Start with a detailed implementation plan, developed up front, with as many key collaborators at the table as possible. This will avert a lot of headaches down the road. The help of a skilled consultant from outside of the organization may be needed here to facilitate the initial discussion, one with no vested interest in the inevitable internal politics simmering just under the surface. We received technical assistance under a grant from the National Institute of Corrections that allowed us to bring in a number of consultants to help us get started.

During the planning phase, the organization should:

- Take a hard look at what the system does as a matter of routine. Identify those things that are absolutely mission-critical, and those that are meaningless and wasteful. Gather consensus around those things that truly matter.
- Engage in an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to determine the organization's operational position, culture and readiness to absorb change.
- Identify resources that will be needed. Where will they come from?
- Identify and recruit individuals at all levels of the system who can serve as catalysts for change, helping to generate and sustain energy and commitment for an implementation process.
- Carefully assess the prevailing attitudes, values and beliefs of all major stakeholders, and how they might be expected to either support or inhibit an evidence-based change process. Anticipate and plan for the impact of those who will drag their feet or create resistance to change.
- Gather your mentors around you. They can help keep you motivated and committed to the task at hand. They can also cheer you up when things inevitably don't go exactly as planned.

It is particularly important to take a careful inventory of tasks and duties performed by staff every day, determine which are in alignment with an outcome-focused orientation, and which are process-driven busy work, representing little or no long-term value. We found that often an

officer's time was consumed by activities designed more for the sake of short-term efficiency than long-term effectiveness. In effect, the paperwork was getting in the way of the people work.

In an evidence-based environment, there are no sacred cows. Everything is subject to scrutiny and question. Determine which low-value tasks can be streamlined or eliminated completely. Identify those tasks that have more outcome-related value and accentuate them. Then look at what mission-critical capacity may be completely lacking in your system and prepare to build it from scratch, along with your community partners.

The dirty little secret of an evidence-based implementation is that it is initially harder than "business as usual". Whatever you might hope for in terms of additional resources, you may be lucky to get half. Things will gradually improve once everyone has mastered new skills, but the going early on may be tough. Your staff needs to hear this from you up front. Finding efficiencies in your operation will allow staff to grow into their new roles incrementally, so that the learning curve doesn't kill them. Unfortunately, I speak from experience. I often had my foot mashed down on the gas pedal, resulting at one point in something approaching staff mutiny, once my staff figured out how hard it was to fit the implementation pieces into their busy workday. I failed to fully enunciate how the "frontloading" of the supervision effort would save officers time in the long run, as communication with offenders improved and the authoritative "shoving match" we had engaged in was replaced by a correctional partnership based on "win-win" strategies. Once this happened, violations would decrease, outcomes would improve and their work life would become a more positive experience.

In the Virginia pilots, the participating chiefs were given the autonomy to rewrite our contact requirements to better reflect the tenets of an evidence-based approach. We largely discarded our traditional contact-driven standards that tended to produce a "cookie cutter" supervision style, replacing them with an emphasis on the *quality* of the contacts required to support better offender outcomes. This was a huge shift in mindset, from "counting contacts" to "making contacts count". In the process, we minimized low-quality contacts in lower-risk cases that simply wasted time better spent at the opposite end of the risk spectrum.

Be prepared to build in room for contingencies that are beyond your control. Economic downturns, resource shortfalls, job market fluctuations and staff turnover can all wreak havoc on the execution of an EBP implementation plan. Remain flexible when it looks like you will not meet implementation deadlines. Life will go on. Keep your eye on the prize. Your situation is unique, and whatever goals you have set for your organization must be tempered by the understanding that there will be unexpected bumps in the road that will slow you down from time to time.

Cultural Change Management and Vision

An evidence-based approach works best when developed from the ground up, at the field level. Find bright and energetic people in your organization to serve as ambassadors, mavens and coaches. Ultimately, your implementation will succeed or fail based on the work and commitment of key staff. Find fertile ground, plant seeds, and tend what you have planted. Some in your organization will be on board from the very beginning and eager to assume leadership roles. Once a change movement has taken hold, some who were initially resistant will want to jump in as well. Be prepared to roll with the resistance that accompanies a change process and keep in mind that there will always be those, both inside and outside of the organization, that want to see you fail. You will never be able to convince everyone to come along for the ride. Accept that fact early on, and you might not need medication later (my favorites, the two T's, Tylenol and Tums).

Your vision for the organization should be communicated clearly and often to everyone around you, so that there is absolutely no mistaking where you are leading them. Give staff time to adapt to new concepts, to gain and master new skills and to demonstrate that mastery. Set high standards, but be patient. If you are lucky, you will have only a handful that stubbornly resist coming over to your side. Dealing with the most resistant will require you to set specific performance goals and expectations, and to provide regular, consistent affirmations when you catch them doing something right. Whatever they choose to do, uncommitted staff cannot be given an opportunity to pollute the culture. Some will choose to leave, while others may eventually come on board and can become key players in the implementation. While you're at it, make sure to regularly thank those in your corner for their trust in your leadership. It will make them want to work that much harder for change.

In particular, try to get your management team and seasoned veterans to embrace your vision early on. They may be the hardest to sway. Most will have been doing things the same way for a number of years, and will resent any insinuation that they have been doing it "wrong". Change is hard for everyone, but particularly hard for those with high levels of proficiency in, and respect for, the established ways of doing "business as usual". They may be intimidated at the prospect of learning new skills at the same time as those they supervise. Training them first makes good sense.

Try not to spring new things on staff without first discussing it with your management team. Managers don't like surprises, and they thrive on the opportunity to have input. We started having weekly management meetings to nip small problems in the bud and to take the office "temperature" every Monday morning. These meetings helped us become a more cohesive group, enhanced mutual trust, and let us air our dirty laundry behind closed doors, not in front of line staff where it could do a lot of damage.

Often, those staff members most enthusiastic about a change process are those who are younger and less experienced. They haven't established much of a frame of reference as to how the work should be done. Some will have recently been through a college curriculum in which evidence-based correctional principles and practices were taught. They are often more open to new ideas and the acquisition of new skills. Herein lay the potential makings of an organizational generation gap, a turf war that will require considerable skill to navigate if infighting among seasoned and newer staff is to be avoided.

There will be some who give lip service to culture change, while secretly undermining your plans. Do not allow them to go underground. If your rapport with other staff is healthy, you will soon know who the malcontents are. Those who are off the bus should be given an avenue for voicing their concerns and their resistance. Their thinking and attitudes will need to be heard, explored and challenged, patiently and with the best active listening skills you can muster.

I found that staff could be motivated by the suggestion that they were making history, that they had arrived at a place where the old walls were coming down, with unlimited opportunity to reengineer their profession for the better. It's an exciting time to be in the work, and that excitement can be infectious if presented in just the right way. Of course, sugar-coating the challenge is not recommended. Staff should know exactly what you are getting them into.

Foster the development of a "learning organization" (Senge, 1990), where it's OK to make mistakes and to have your skills honestly assessed by others. Keep the mood light, encourage staff to laugh and enjoy their day, model that fun and balance in your own work life, and set about creating a culture of hope and optimism. In so doing, you will maintain an atmosphere that keeps everyone relaxed and interested in learning more and getting better. Coming to work should be as enjoyable and rewarding as you can possibly make it. I found that allowing staff to flex their work schedules was a big incentive, particularly among those with families. Just a kind word or a post-it note of encouragement left on a desk can have a significant positive impact on the mood around the office. Helping staff find that elusive balance between their work and personal life, and modeling it in your own, helps keep morale high, despite the stress of mastering new skills amid ongoing workload pressures.

Little things can make a big difference. We instituted "casual Thursday", the first Thursday of each month, on which staff could wear anything they wanted to work, and the management team would see any probationers who came in. We also created a procedure to triage "walk-ins" at the front desk and determine their level of need. This protected officers' schedules and helped them manage their time better. We held picnics and other staff development activities designed to take the edge off a little and encourage open communication. We had "open agenda" staff meetings designed simply to get some honest discussion going among staff about what was happening and how everyone felt about it.

Healthy cultures, those with the capacity to embrace new concepts such as EBP, are based largely on trust. It is absolutely essential to be real, to mean what you say, to communicate well and to model at all times what it is you expect from others. If staff sense any inconsistencies between what you preach and what you practice, trust will go right out the window, and along with it, any chance you had of getting your implementation pieces in place. Likewise, it is important to have those above you in your system who trust you and support what you are trying to accomplish. Most of the resources and operational flexibility you will need must come from those higher in the chain of command. They will need to be kept well-apprised of what you are doing, why it's important, and what you need to accomplish it. Some "managing up" might be needed.

Skill Acquisition

First, start with your own skills. Read as much of the "What Works" literature you can get your hands on, so that you will be up to speed on the latest research and how you can best operationalize it. The National Institute of Corrections website (www.nicic.org) is an excellent place to start.

Take a real, honest inventory of your own strengths and weaknesses, so that you can move forward in your professional development. Try taking a "360 degree" personal assessment that can help you better understand your management style. I did one of these assessments and found it very helpful. You may find, as I did, that your view of your strengths and weaknesses differs considerably from how others see you.

You should be willing to learn and master the same evidence-based skills, tools and techniques you are requiring of your staff. Your credibility is at stake. You need to be able to model what good skills look like, and be able to honestly and accurately critique the performance of others. You can't do this without mastering the skills yourself. Your presence in the training setting signifies that you place significant value in learning. It shows that you are willing to put in the effort required to master the skills being taught, and that you will know what mastery looks like when observed in others. Staff will respect you for that.

Learning entails more than just sitting through a class. If you and your staff hope to achieve proficiency at more than a mechanical level, practice is essential for everyone. Just as one learns to play the piano, skills are acquired over an extended period of time with directed practice and regular coaching. Once attained, skills must be periodically refreshed to maintain and enhance proficiency. Unfortunately, it's not like riding a bike. You can "unlearn" skills if they're allowed to lie dormant.

Some staff will need remedial training and coaching. Do not view this as a sign that they don't care, or that they are uncommitted to what you are trying to achieve. They may just need

additional support, practice and modeling. Don't give up on them. Often when they are struggling, staff respond better to a peer as their skills coach, rather than a supervisor. Train exceptional staff to serve as coaches. They can spread the enthusiasm and expertise necessary to support a learning environment. Just make sure you take some existing tasks away from your coaches, so that you don't burn them out.

Recognize and reward mastery of the skills at which you want staff to excel. Offer formal recognition at staff meetings, with a certificate of appreciation and a nominal cash award or movie tickets. This sets the tone for what you are after. Staff are probably better than you at assessing the performance level of their peers, so they should have a voice in who is recognized. On a more informal basis, sit in on staff interactions with offenders and provide feedback at the conclusion. After a while staff will get used to being observed and might even welcome it as an opportunity to receive honest feedback and improve upon their skills.

When in doubt, slow down. Skill acquisition is hard work, it takes a long time, and it is easier for some than others. Everyday work life will conspire to get in the way of a learning organization. Still, learning must remain a high priority. Otherwise, staff will find ways to weasel out, claiming that their overwhelming workload leaves no time for training and practice. They may have a point. If so, find something else to take away or streamline a low-priority duty to give staff the time to concentrate on learning and practice. It's that important.

Tools, Infrastructure & Resources

There will never be a "good" time to begin your evidence-based implementation. Resources (or lack thereof) will always be an issue, no matter how well you time the roll-out. Knowing that, start small and take incremental steps that build upon your initial successes. Your implementation will take longer if you go slowly, but by taking your time you can use what limited resources you have to their greatest advantage.

Having said that, you will need some tools to help you get started. The most important of these is a validated, fourth-generation assessment instrument, one that measures various risk factors and the criminogenic (crime-producing) needs that fuel them. The assessment instrument should include an integrated case planning module to help translate data into action, and the capacity to track program and offender outcomes. Administration of this instrument should be brief enough (less than 45 minutes) to be an efficient data collection method, yet comprehensive enough to cover all of the major criminogenic factors identified in the "what works" research, including the generally-accepted criminological theories that explain causation. Along with an actuarial risk tool, your staff should receive training in how to accurately interpret the assessment data so that key issues can be identified and a strong intervention plan enacted. Needless to say, this plan will go nowhere without the engagement and buy-in of the offender and the coordination of effective community resources.

In a new case, staff should initially concentrate their efforts on getting to know the offender, developing a level of comfort in the relationship, and starting to ask open-ended questions that get at the heart of the criminal thinking that underlies bad behavior, just as you would peel an onion. This discussion should lead the offender to a deeper understanding of who they are and how they got that way. Engaging the offender in the process and achieving “buy-in” should lead to an agreement on what needs to change, and a strategy and timeline for making that change. There should also be an understanding as to how success (or lack thereof) will be measured, the incentives to be employed for successful completion of plan items, and the sanctions to be imposed for falling short. Creating an effective supervision plan, one that is a living, breathing document that changes and grows as the supervision does, is where the time invested in assessment and deportment starts to pay off. The plan is not intended to be shoved in the file and forgotten. It should be the focal point of supervision and intervention, and should help drive the change process.

Staff may initially balk at the time commitment required to get a case up and running this way. They will need reassurance that the extra work put in up front will pay dividends as the supervision unfolds, leading to better cooperation, a deeper understanding of the needs of the case and a reduction in violations, revocations, and new crime.

Staff will also need to reach an understanding that they cannot give “Cadillac” level services to everyone. The bulk of their resources, time and energy must be applied in those cases representing the highest risk of recidivism. Those at lower risk require little supervision from a public safety standpoint, although they still may need a treatment referral to address their needs. There is a tendency to over-supervise low risk clients, but it is a waste of precious resources that waters down your overall effort. Incidentally, the research shows that overdosing low-risk offenders with supervision can actually *increase* their risk of recidivism (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2001). We employed a telephone supervision system for the lowest third of our risk spectrum, largely removing them from active supervision.

Dealing with noncompliant behavior during the supervision process requires the careful selection of appropriate sanctions, designed to support better choices. We turned to “thinking reports” when employing sanctions. Thinking reports get at the underlying cognitive and emotional features of decision-making, so that the offender can better process their misbehavior and understand its sources. Then alternative ways of thinking and behaving can be considered, practiced and reinforced. Thinking reports can be used in tandem with other sanctions to help offenders learn from their mistakes and make better judgments in the future.

The physical setting in which the supervision takes place might also need some work. How does your lobby look? Is it dirty, poorly lit, with distressed/broken furniture and overflowing trash cans? That’s the first thing a new probationer sees when they walk into the building. First impressions are important. At my office, we shut down for an afternoon one day to beautify the lobby with a fresh coat of paint. We also ordered some new furniture and hung some framed

pictures and inspirational quotes on the walls. For months afterward, I heard comments from probationers about how great the office looked, and how it made coming in more pleasant. In fact, the lobby stayed cleaner once we freshened it up. In short, try to create a physical environment that is welcoming and supportive of the work you are doing.

The most important resource you have, of course, is your staff. Treat them that way. Find ways to relieve the pressure, take their minds off of their inbox, and encourage informal interaction. Manage by walking around. Make yourself available, and listen more than you talk (again, something I was not particularly good at). Take maximum advantage of your management team. They are your eyes and ears, being closer to the work than you can afford to be most of the time. Give them an opportunity to lead, and make sure that you fully value their contribution.

Be willing to swallow your pride and ask for help when you get stuck. There are now a number of practitioners that have been where you are, or where you hope to be. The National Institute of Corrections can put you in touch with others who are or have been in a similar situation. There may be others in your state who can offer some guidance. Keep in mind, however, that every implementation process is unique, and what worked for someone else might not work for you. Likewise, don't hesitate to try something that didn't work for others, as long as it is supported by research. You might have better results.

Finally, learn how to be a "squeaky wheel". Always be on the lookout for opportunities to get your hands on additional resources, be it grants or other sources of funding. Most budget folks are concerned foremost with balancing this year's budget, and may not fully appreciate the value of lowering recidivism rates five to ten years from now. Decision-makers at the top of the organization will need to support a long-term resource allocation strategy, if resources are to be properly invested in producing better outcomes.

Personnel and Operational Capacity

Hiring and promotional decisions are the most important a leader will make. They can have lasting ramifications for the agency. So, hire the best you can find, understanding the set of skills and attitudes you are looking for. Those with the fire in the belly to become a change agent are pretty easy to spot if you ask the right questions in the interview setting. I asked a lot of attitudinal questions during interviews, such as "What can you tell me about your correctional philosophy?" and "What do you think works best with this population and why?" I could tell right away if an applicant had ever considered these questions. Hire for capacity. You can always teach the skills. Expect to make a bad hire occasionally, and try not to beat yourself up about it. It happens.

Increased turnover during the implementation process is to be expected. It happens when you can least afford it, and yet turnover is a natural byproduct of any major organizational shift.

Some staff will hear what you're up to, sense that the culture is changing, question whether that's the job they signed up for, and resign or transfer to another office. Some of them might be your most experienced people. You certainly don't want to lose talented staff, in whom much has been invested and on whom you have depended for years. Try your best to help them get on board, or help them make a graceful exit. Just don't let them hang around and pollute the environment.

After several years of feeling sorry for myself, I came to view every vacancy as an *opportunity*, a chance to hire someone with the right stuff for an evidence-based mission. I also learned that it's OK to be picky, even if it means that no applicant in the pool measures up and the position has to be re-advertised. Better to have the chair stay empty for a few more months than to be filled by an ill-suited candidate.

While examining your organization's capacity for change, don't overlook your support staff. Secretaries and administrative staff have good ideas and see the work from a different point of view. Their contribution should be valued. Incidentally, many of the personnel issues I faced involved friction between officers and secretaries, for a variety of reasons (different roles, different educational levels, different expectations, etc.). Look for opportunities to bring line and support staff together to talk it out.

In general, personnel issues are more challenging than the technical aspects of an EBP implementation process. These are emotional events, requiring considerable time, skill and sensitivity to solve. They can fester if not addressed quickly and deftly. I botched more than my fair share.

Collaboration

It is important to get key stakeholders around the table from the very beginning, even those who are resistant and stonewalling. Ideally, the list should include judges, prosecutors, police, jail staff, treatment providers, criminal justice planners, community/neighborhood leaders, state-level leaders, consultants, and others in the criminal justice system. Having a carefully selected ex-offender on board (as a former consumer of correctional services) might also be helpful. Everyone who has an interest in the outcome should have a voice. Review the science together. After a while, some semblance of a consensus will start to form around the goals, direction and role of each member of the team.

Meet regularly. Make it the same day of the week or month, at the same time, in the same place. Lunch meetings work well. People need to eat anyway. The chair of the meetings should rotate among the major players.

Maintain enthusiasm for what you are trying to achieve together. Develop a shared vision for what that future looks like. Consider the benefits to your community if you are successful, and the implications if you fail. A sense of controlled urgency should prevail. Those who voice the most resistance must be given time to reconsider their position, with help from the group. You will need just about everyone mentioned above to achieve full integration of an evidence-based approach into your criminal justice system, realizing that it may take many years, and of course not everyone will be gung-ho.

Don't forget to include those closest to the offender in your collaborative efforts. Look for ways to incorporate any positive role models in the family, neighborhood, church and place of employment to help create and sustain the conditions necessary for positive change. Much of the success or failure in a case depends on the support an offender has in his or her "natural community". Home and employment visits should be made with this in mind.

If there are others in your state or community on the same path as you, try to meet with them at least quarterly. Pick their brains. Be open to learning from them. They may have figured out solutions to challenges you have in common. There is safety in numbers and strength in a common agenda. Alone, you run the risk of being marginalized. With other like-minded practitioners supporting your efforts, you become less vulnerable and more credible. Ultimately, what you are after is a tipping point, where evidence-based concepts replace "business as usual" in your broader correctional culture. All movements have to start somewhere.

Appreciate the fact that implementation is not a competition or a race to the finish. Other sites might get ahead of you. Each implementation starts where it is, and must play the hand it was dealt. Collaboration is all about putting egos away, and finding those points of common ground upon which alliances can be built, even among those you may not personally care for.

Quality Assurance and Evaluation

It has become clear that good (evidence-based) program models are not enough. They must also be well-implemented. Good implementation requires a high degree of fidelity to the program design. Strive to maintain fidelity to evidence-based principles and program components in measuring your performance. Ensuring fidelity requires on-going collection and analysis of data. An implementation strategy should be built that way from the ground up. Early on, important questions need to be asked:

- What is it we are after?
- How do we define success? What does it look like?
- How do we capture the essence of that success in numbers?
- How can we build our data sets so that we are measuring and understanding those things that matter most?

- What kinds of data can help us figure out what’s working, what isn’t, and what to do about it?
- How can we efficiently gather, store and crunch that data to produce insights that tell us what we need to know to get better?
- Where can we find someone with no vested interest in the outcome to help us design and implement a data management and evaluation system that works best for us?
- Who will be held accountable for the results we get?

Here is another place where a consultant can help. Complex correctional systems are inherently difficult to measure. Data management is not for the amateur. The power of computers can certainly be harnessed to gather and interpret valuable data, but designing something that works for you is best left to the professionals, once you know what it is that you want to get out of the process.

Day-to-day quality assurance is more a matter of just wandering around. Eavesdropping outside an office door, as an interview with an offender takes place, is a great way to learn quite a bit in just a few minutes:

- Is the interaction respectful?
- Is appropriate modeling taking place?
- Is the officer using their emerging communication skills to address behavior, without being judgmental or condescending?
- Is the supervision plan the major focus for discussion? Does the officer take the time to regularly update the plan with a new list of tasks and activities supportive of the overall case goals? Is the offender engaged in this planning process?
- Is the officer doing more listening than talking, using open-ended, probing questions to get the offender’s thinking and values out in the open?
- Are there abundant affirmations given when offenders do well?
- Is there evidence of a mutually-beneficial relationship, or does the officer rely primarily on their authority to ensure “compliance”?

These are the kinds of things you can learn over time just by listening in, things that you won’t learn by reviewing case files.

More formally, job descriptions and work profiles should be adjusted to emphasize the new skills that staff are learning. Performance evaluations should assess the extent to which these new skills are being mastered. This is one area where staff might become particularly uneasy. They are accustomed to having their performance measured by contact-driven standards (simply counting the type and number of contacts made), and the idea that their work will be assessed qualitatively rather than quantitatively may be a real adjustment. Ease into it over several performance cycles, gradually adding the expectations that new skills be learned and mastered, one by one. If you are part of a larger organization, you will need the help and cooperation of

your human resources department to help set meaningful performance measures, an effective package of employee incentives, and compensation that rewards the acquisition of enhanced skills.

Assuming that you achieve your initial EBP implementation goals, you will still face the challenge of sustaining them. This has always been one of my biggest concerns. There is a fine line between expecting everyone's best effort on most days, and burning them out in your zeal to get to the "finish line". The fact is that you are never finished. Implementation and refinement are part of an ongoing process. You experiment, you learn, you tinker with things, you go back to the drawing board and you never stop improving. All of this sounds exhausting, but if you are doing it right, it can be one of the most rewarding things you will ever do professionally.

Leadership and Behavior-Modeling

Here are a few things I learned, some the hard way, about leading an EBP implementation. I saved this for last, because this piece is the most exhausting of all, and the most crucial. Here's why.

Once you get started on this path, everyone will be looking at you, all of the time. You are in a fish bowl. Folks will either draw strength from your vision and your resolve, or they will find flaws in your strategy or your commitment and attempt to exploit them. How you carry yourself, both inside and outside of the office, will serve as a model for others. Here are some hard questions you must find answers to:

- What kind of model do you want others to emulate? What is most important to emphasize in your modeling? In what areas do you need to improve, personally and professionally, to convincingly project to others those values you are trying to instill?
- How do you display, every day, the communication skills you are trying to get your staff to use with each other and their clientele?
- Are you willing to learn new things along everyone else, to coach them and honestly assess how well they are doing?
- Do you have enough social capital to lead, to motivate others to work harder than they ever have, and to abandon the comfort of what they have known and are used to?

Here's a good place to start. Hold a staff meeting. Have a frank discussion about where the agency is now, and what can be done to reduce the future threat your offender population poses. Share your vision for a future that enhances the risk reduction aspects of the job. Offer up the science as justification. Express your belief that, in a position of leadership, you have an obligation to provide taxpayers with the biggest "bang" possible for the correctional "buck" they are investing. Thank everyone for their hard work so far, but make it clear that "business as

usual” just isn’t working very well in any long-term sense. Emphasize that there is no turning back.

Then go for it. There will be moans of protest, whispering behind your back, possibly some passive-aggressive behavior, maybe even some open hostility. Let it wash over you like an ocean wave. Most of the resistance will pass, once everyone realizes that you are not kidding, you are not backing down, and you are not giving in to their whining. Be patient, but steadfast. People will get the message: “This is the way it’s going to be, and I can either get on board or find somewhere else to work”. Make it clear to the nay-sayers that you will not allow them to become a cancer. They have to choose.

You will find that some are refreshingly enthusiastic toward this stated change in direction. They too may have harbored doubts about the merits of “business as usual”. Feed off of their energy, use their emerging skills as a model for others, challenge them to gain mastery and then to teach others. They are your future leaders. Reward them in every way you can think of and do whatever you can to hang onto them.

As a leader, the biggest thing I had to work on was my listening skills. They were, by any measure, lacking. My staff and my Motivational Interviewing coach helped me learn the value of active listening. Other people are great sources of ideas. Try to create an atmosphere of trust, where it’s OK for staff to question your plans, your motives, your tactics, or your pace, and *listen to what they are telling you*. Chances are they are right on the money.

Above all else, take care of yourself. An evidence-based implementation effort can take a huge emotional and physical toll on its leader. Try to maintain a healthy balance, take time off for vacations and “mental health” days, and celebrate the many little successes that will come your way. Things will rarely be going as badly or as slowly as you think they are. You can, however, count on there being some dark days. Close your door, take a walk, leave work early. Do whatever you have to do to keep from modeling defeatist attitudes to your staff. They need to be able to count on you to stay positive when the heat is on.

Conclusions

Hopefully, you have not run for the hills by now. What you are preparing to do represents nothing less than a total reengineering of your profession. This is exciting. Not many leaders get a chance to do it. But along with that opportunity, you’ve got a tiger by the tail. Hang on tight.

It’s too early to see how these changes in the way my office does business will impact recidivism. We have attempted to be true to the science, but will have to wait probably another three years for recidivism data that tells us much. Early indicators are promising. In our first

three years of EBP implementation, we raised our successful case closing rates from 61% to 71%. This alone tells us nothing. Case closing rates can rise due to factors having nothing to do with more effective intervention. Yet, it does give us hope that we are on to something.

I have found that the trickiest part in implementing an evidence-based model is in trying to weave all of the components mentioned in this paper together into some unifying whole. Staff will have a tendency to see separate elements as stand-alone pieces, when in fact they are all complementary and interdependent. At its best, this set of practices is a well-orchestrated dance, a blend of art and science, a synergy of human judgment and powerful predictive tools.

My goal here has simply been to raise some awareness, plant a few seeds, tell a few war stories and get you thinking about how your implementation might play out. If you have the guts, vision, skill, patience and energy, this can be a very rewarding journey, one that will benefit your community, the offender population, your staff and you personally. There are pitfalls hidden along the way. I hope that now you have a little better idea of where they might be hiding. Some will get you anyway. Shake it off, keep moving forward, and good luck. It's worth doing.

About the Author

Neal Goodloe has 25 years of experience in community corrections, 23 years of it with the District 9 Probation and Parole Office in Charlottesville, Virginia. He retired from state service in May 2008 as the chief probation officer for that district. During his tenure, he established an evidence-based practices model in his district as one of five Virginia pilot sites. Mr. Goodloe recently joined the staff at the Northpointe Institute for Public Management, where he serves as a consultant and trainer. He can be reached at ngoodloe@npipm.com.

This article was written with tremendous respect and gratitude for all of those who made it possible. Special thanks go to the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Corrections, to my mentors, fellow chiefs and local probation directors, consultants, my management team, treatment cohorts, judges, prosecutors, and in particular, to the best staff anyone could ever ask for. Our lessons learned came at a cost I will never be able to repay. It is my hope that these lessons can benefit others.

References

Correctional Populations in the United States, 1980 – 2006 (2007). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm>.

Bogue, B. N. Campbell, M. Carey, E. Clawson, D. Faust, K. Florio, L. Joplin, G. Keiser, B. Wasson and W. Woodward. (2004) *Implementing Evidence-Based Practice in Community Corrections – The Principles of Effective Intervention*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.

Direct Expenditure by Criminal Justice Function 1982 – 2005 (2006). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/eande.htm>.

Langan, P. A. and Levin, D. J. (2002). *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics..

Lowenkamp, C. T. and Latessa, E. J. (2004). Understanding the Risk Principle: How and Why Correctional Interventions Harm Low-Risk Offenders. *Topics in Community Corrections*.

Miller, W. R. and Rollnick, S. (2002) *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change*. New York: Guilford Press

Senge, P. M. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Taxman, F. S., Shepardson, E. S. and Byrne, J. M. (2004). *Tools of the Trade – A Guide to Incorporating Science into Practice*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.