Implementing Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in Community Corrections, 2nd Edition

CHAPTER 4
IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED PRINCIPLES

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CHAPTER 4: IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED PRINCIPLES

Aligning the eight evidence-based principles with the core business practices of an organization is a significant challenge and will largely determine the impact the organization has on sustained reductions in recidivism. In order to accomplish this shift to an outcome orientation, practitioners must be prepared to dedicate themselves to a mission that focuses on achieving sustained reductions in recidivism, and to operationalize that mission at the individual, organizational, and system levels. At each of these levels, thorough, comprehensive, and strategic planning will be necessary in order to succeed. Identifying, prioritizing, and formulating well-timed plans for addressing such particular issues are tasks requiring system collaboration and a focus on organizational development (see Chapters 5 and 6).

An essential caveat here is a caution about implementation; the devil is in the details. However, there is helpful literature regarding implementation principles. Prior to embarking on any implementation or strategic planning project, a succinct review of this literature is recommended (Bernstein et al, 2001; Durlak, 1998; Ellickson et al, 1983; Gendreau et al, 1999; Henggeler et al, 1997; Harris & Smith, 1996; Mihalic & Irwin, 2003; Mihalic et at, 2004; Burke, 2008; Crime and Justice Institute, 2009). This chapter offers some suggestions on approaching the challenge of implementation.

1. Understanding the Components of Correctional Interventions

Initially it is instructive to consider the components of corrections services and how they should relate to each other. One way to deconstruct a community corrections intervention for planning or evaluation purposes is to consider the separate aspects of the intervention that might influence an offender’s potential for behavioral change. Researchers and practitioners are quick to recognize a number of common elements in all programs that have some potential impact on outcomes such as recidivism:

- **The Skills of Employees**—a wide array of ongoing interpersonal relations specifically pertaining to the communication skills and interactions exercised between employees and offenders;

- **Decisions on Intervention Assignment**—continuous case management decisions that match offenders to varying levels and types of supervision conditions;

- **Programming**—services, i.e. both treatment and monitoring interventions;

- **Sanctions**—determinations of accountability for assigned obligations and accompanying compliance consequences, i.e., both positive and negative reinforcements;
- Community Linkages—formal and informal interfaces with various community organizations and groups;

- Case Management—a case management system that relegates individual case objectives and expectations within a prescribed set of policies and procedures; and

- Organization—internal (operational) and external (policy environment) organizational structures, management techniques, and culture.

Each of these factors can be construed as separate processes that interact with each other continuously in any community corrections setting (e.g., probation, parole, outpatient treatment, residential, etc.). Depending on how well the processes are aligned and managed, they can either enhance or diminish successful outcomes. An organization, for example, might provide an excellent cognitive skill-building curriculum that has good research support but is delivered by employees with limited training or skills. Conversely, an organization might be structured so that there is no differentiation of services (one size fits all) and the programming has limited or negligible research support, but employees' overall skills are excellent. A broad interpretation of the existing research suggests that each of the above seven factors have their own independent effect on successful outcomes. Maximum benefit is achieved through the interaction of multiple components.

Any organization interested in understanding and improving outcomes must reckon with managing the operation as a set of highly interdependent systems. An organization's ability to become progressively more accountable through the utilization of reliable internal controls (e.g., data) is integral to EBP. This approach is based on established business management practices for measuring performance objectives and achieving greater accountability for specified outcomes (for example, Continuous Quality Improvement or Results Based Accountability). Providing routine and accurate performance feedback to employees is associated with improved productivity, profit, and other outcomes; without regular access to data, employees will not have the information they need to change their behavior and improve their practices. Data is also useful when advocating for certain practices with policymakers, stakeholder groups, and the community.

2. Translating the Principles into Practice

Implementing and integrating this web of practice in corrections is a tremendous challenge requiring strong leadership and commitment. Such an undertaking involves more than simply implementing a research recommended program or two. Minimally, EBP involves:

- Developing employee competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) congruent with current research-supported practice (principles #1-8);
Implementing offender programming consistent with research recommendations (#2-6);

Sufficiently monitoring employee actions and offender programming to identify discrepancies or fidelity issues (#7);

Routinely obtaining verifiable outcome evidence (#8) associated with employee performance and offender programming.

Implementing these functions is tantamount to revolutionizing most corrections organizations. Nevertheless, many agencies are taking on this challenge and have begun to increase their focus on outcomes and shift their priorities. Two fundamentally different approaches are necessary for such an alteration in priorities. One, the outside/in approach, brings insights gleaned from external research evidence to bear on internal organizational practices. The other, the inside-out approach, increases organizational capacity to internally measure performance and outcomes for current practice. When these two interdependent strategies are employed, an organization acquires the ability to understand what is necessary and practicable to improve its outcomes. The following describes how these approaches support EBP in slightly different ways.

**Outside/In Approach**

Adopting research-supported program models fosters an outcome orientation and minimizes the syndrome of ‘reinventing-the-wheel’. Insights, practices, and intervention strategies gleaned from external research can significantly improve the efficacy any program has if implemented with appropriate fidelity.

One approach to EBP is to pay strict attention to the external research and carefully introduce those programs or interventions that are supported by the best research. There are a growing number of examples of internal promotion of external evidence-based programs. The Blueprint Project, conducted by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, uses independent outside research to promote the implementation of effective juvenile programs (Mihalic et al. 2001).

The National Institute of Justice commissioned research investigators to conduct similar reviews of both adult and juvenile offender programming, recommending programs according to the caliber of the research support (Sherman et al, 1998). The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, a non-partisan state research institute, regularly conducts and publishes similar reviews for adult and juvenile offender programming implemented in Washington (Aos, 1998).

What these strategies have in common is the promotion of research-supported external program models within internal implementation and operations. These are outside-in applications striving to replicate proven models with fidelity. This approach is limited by the fact that environmental, cultural, and operational features vary between organizations and often have significant effect on program efficacy (Palmer 1995; Mihalic & Irwin,
2003). Thus, the second inside-out approach to evidence-based practice attends to these internal factors.

### THE BLUEPRINTS PROJECT

The Blueprint Project, conducted by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV), examined literature on over 500 different program interventions with at-risk or delinquent youth. Ten programs met CSPV’s strict criteria for scientific support. These were labeled Blueprint programs, while programs that partially met the criteria were designated Promising (Mihalic et al. 2001).

CSPV documented the operational details of these programs and distributed the descriptions to practitioners, emphasizing the importance of maintaining fidelity to the program models.

Programs that were scientifically determined to produce systematic and significant results were identified and promoted through a central clearing-house (Mihalic et al, 2004).

### Inside/Out Approach

Developing and maintaining ongoing internal controls, particularly information controls related to key service components (e.g., targeted interventions, treatment dosage, treatment attendance and adherence, etc.) ensures greater operational ability to affect outcomes.

The program evaluation, performance, and audit research literature emphasizes that insufficient information controls not only hamper program assessment, but impede program performance (Bernstein et al, 2001; Burrell, 1998; Dilulio et al, 1993; Gendreau & Andrews, 2001; Lipton et al, 2000; Mee-Lee et al, 1996;). Such internal control issues appear not only in program evaluation research, but also in organizational development, business, and systems analysis.

Internal controls provide information and mechanisms for ensuring that an organization will accomplish its mission (i.e., recidivism reduction). For agencies with historically “command and control” corrections orientations, the transition to outcome-oriented corrections is often significant (Burrell 1998; Dilulio et al 1993; Lipton et al. 2000). Therefore, developing new methods for gathering operational information and then sharing and learning from them is a large part of the transition from custodial to outcome orientation in corrections.

Information controls necessary for implementing new or best practices specifically focus on key components within the desired practices. They include an ongoing process of identifying, measuring, and reporting key operational processes and functions. An organization or organization has many options regarding what to measure. Some examples are:

- **Offender measures**, such as risk levels, criminogenic needs, and motivation.
- **Operational measures**, such as assigning caseload by risk, referring to appropriate interventions, program availability, program integrity, and program quality assurance norms.

- **Employee measures**, such as interpersonal skills, abilities to discern anti-social thinking and behavior, and attitudes and beliefs regarding interventions.

Though many examples of potential measures are available in the literature, it is ultimately the decision of each organization as to what data is available and most useful for monitoring progress.

### 3. Applying the Principles at the Case, Organization and System Levels

The eight principles provide a roadmap for intervention at the level of an individual case, with the potential to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. However, in many ways the principles are universal to human and organizational behavior, and they can also be applied to agencies and systems that are attempting to change their collective behavior. Below, the application of the principles at the case, organization, and system levels are described.

#### Case Level

At the case level, the logical implication is that one must assess (principle #1) in order to triage and targeting interventions (#3), and that it is beneficial to begin building offender motivation (#2) prior to engaging these offenders in skill building activities (#4). Similarly, positively reinforcing new skills (#5) has more relevancy after the skills have been introduced and trained (#4) and at least partially in advance of the offender’s realignment with pro-social groups and friends (#6). The seventh (measure relevant practices) and eighth (provide feedback) principles need to follow the activities described throughout all the proceeding principles. Assessing an offender’s readiness to change as well as the ability to use newly acquired skills is possible anywhere along the case management continuum. These last two principles can and should be applicable after any of the earlier principles but they also can be considered cumulative and provide feedback both to the officer and the client on the entire case management process.
Organization Level
The principles, when applied at the organizational level, assist with more closely aligning employee behavior and organizational operations with EBP. Initial assessment of organizational climate and culture followed by motivational enhancement will help employees to prepare for the significant changes ahead. Organizational priorities must be clarified and new protocols established and trained, with ample opportunity for employees to practice new skills and receive feedback. Increasing positive rewards for employees who demonstrate new skills and proficiency is straightforward and an accepted standard in many organizations. The sixth principle regarding providing ongoing support in natural communities can be related to teamwork within the organization as well as with external stakeholders. The seventh and eighth principles are primarily about developing quality assurance systems, both to provide outcome data within the organization, but also to provide data to assist with marketing the organization to external stakeholders.

System Level
The application of the principles at the system level is fundamentally no different than the organizational level. Funding, for most systems, channels through state and local agencies having either jurisdictional or oversight responsibilities. Demonstrating the value of EBP is crucial at this level in order to effectively make the argument for increases in future funding. Another distinction in applying the principles at the system level is the need for policy and practice integration. The principles for EBP must be understood and supported by policy makers so that appropriate policy development coincides effectively with implementation. Once a system decisively directs its mission towards an outcome such as sustained reductions in recidivism, it becomes incumbent on the system to deliberately rely upon scientific methods and principles. This will require coordinated implementation plans, communication, cross-training and accountability, as well as maintaining morale as organizations struggle with the complexities of EBP implementation.

4. Recommended Guidelines for Implementing Effective Interventions

Below are seven recommended guidelines for implementing effective interventions based on the collective wisdom and experience of professionals in the field. These guidelines are based on recent preliminary implementation research; they are not necessarily based on scientifically tested knowledge. (For additional discussion of research on implementation, please see Fixen et al., 2005)

I. Limit new projects to mission-related initiatives.
Clear identification and focus upon mission is critical within business and the best-run public agencies. When mission scope creep occurs, it has a negative effect on progress, morale, and outcomes.
(Ellickson et al, 1983; Harris & Smith, 1996;
II. Assess progress of implementation processes using quantifiable data.
Monitoring system implementations for current, valid information regarding progress, obstacles, and direction changes is pivotal to project success. These monitoring systems cannot always be designed in advance but implementation plans should include provisions for obtaining this type of ongoing information. (Burrell, 2000; Dilulio et al, 1993; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002; Harris & Smith, 1996; Klein & Teilmann 1980; Mihalic & Irwin, 2003; Mihalic et al, 2004; Palmer, 1995)

III. Acknowledge and accommodate professional overrides with adequate accountability.
No assessment tool, no matter how sophisticated, can (or should) replace a qualified practitioner’s professional judgment. In certain instances, only human judgment can integrate and make the necessary subtle distinctions to adequately recognize and reinforce moral or behavioral progress. All professional overrides, both to higher and lower supervision levels, need to be adequately documented, defensible, and made explicit. (Andrews, et al, 1990; Burrell, 2000; Clear, 1981; Gendreau et al, 1999)

IV. Focus on employee development, including awareness of research, skill development, and management of individual and organizational change processes, within the context of a complete training or human resource development program.
Employees need to develop reasonable familiarity with relevant research, and they need to be actively engaged in the change process. Beginning in the 1990s there has been tremendous growth in the volume and quality of corrections related research. Much of the more recent research is directly relevant to everyday operational practice; therefore it is incumbent on professionals in the field to keep abreast of this literature. The current research literature includes in house investigations, internet resources, and other public sector articles, as well as professional and academic journal publications. This literature is also evolving and becoming more international and inter-disciplinary in scope. It is the responsibility of organizational leadership to assist in the successful dissemination of recent research findings relevant to respective classes of job performers. Informed administrators, information officers, trainers, and other organizational ambassadors are necessary to facilitate this function in larger agencies or systems. Effective fulfillment of this principle is essential to promoting Learning Organizations. (Andrews, 1989; Baer, et al, 1999; Durlak, 1998; Gendreau, et al, 1999; Harland, 1996; Klein & Teilmann 1980; Latessa, et al, 2002; Taxman & Byrne, 2001; Taxman, 2002 and 2008)

V. Routinely measure employee practices (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) that are considered related to outcomes.
Critical employee processes and practices should be routinely monitored in an accurate and objective manner to inform managers of the state of the operation. These measures occur at multiple levels (e.g., aggregate, for example: turnover and organizational cultural beliefs; and individual, for example: interviewing skills and ability to identify thinking errors) and should be organized accordingly and maintained in ongoing databases for the purposes of both supporting management and employee development. This may include
a review of assessment and case plan information for accuracy and alignment with offender needs; observation and feedback on officer interaction techniques; or evaluation of the implementation of cognitive behavioral treatment groups. Measurement and feedback should be conducted in the spirit of continuous quality improvement. (Bernstein, 2001; Gendreau, et al, 1999; Henggeler et al, 1997; Miller & Mount, 2001)

VI. Provide employees timely, relevant, and accurate feedback regarding performance related to outcomes.
Programs and agencies that want to produce better outcomes will ultimately learn to pay closer and more attention to what is involved in generating their own outcomes. Initially, agencies have much to learn and incorporate into policy from the generic research literature in corrections. Ultimately however, in order to achieve deeper adaptations and organizational support of effective practices, immediate, objective, and internal measures of the respective organization will be routinely required.

At an organizational level, gaining appreciation for outcome measurement begins with establishing relevant performance measures. Measuring performance implies a relationship between a given activity and a given output or outcome. These types of measures can be established at either the organizational (aggregate) or individual job performer levels and there are several important issues related to establishing effective performance measures:

1) If a certain kind of performance is worth measuring, it is worth measuring right (with reliability and validity);
2) Any kind of employee or offender activity is worth measuring if it is reliably related to desirable outcomes;
3) If performance measures satisfy both the above conditions, these measures should be routinely generated and made available to employees and/or offenders, in the most user-friendly manner possible.

The primary ingredients of any correctional system or treatment program are employees and offenders. Therefore when a commitment emerges to develop greater focus on outcomes, it behooves managers and employees at all levels to learn how to better measure employees, offenders, and their related interactions. The latter is an evolutionary and ongoing process rather than change of operational components. Some examples of promising performance measures at the organizational level are: proportion of resource gaps at various treatment levels; degree of implementation and program fidelity; employee turnover; and organizational cultural norms. Examples of promising job performer level measures are: adequacy of communication skills; consistency in certain functions (e.g., assessment, case planning, treatment referrals); and caseload average gain scores for offender dynamic risk indicators. (Burrell, 1998; Bogue, 2002; Carey, 2002; Henggeler, 1997; Lipton, et al, 2000; Maple, 2000; O’Leary & Clear, 1997; Taxman 2008)
VII. Utilize high levels of data-driven advocacy and brokerage to enable appropriate community justice/correctional services.

In terms of producing sustained reductions in recidivism, the research indicates that the treatment service network and infrastructure is the most valuable resource that criminal justice agencies can access. Collaborating and providing research and quality assurance support to local service providers enhances interagency understanding, service credibility, and longer-term planning efforts. It also contributes to the stability and expansion of treatment services.

(Bogue, 2002; Corbett, et al, 2000; Gendreau 1996; Maple, 1999; Meyers et al Smith, 2005)

These elements cannot be put in place overnight. It is up to each organization to determine a pace of implementation that is appropriate to the organization’s level of readiness and the resources available. Whatever the pace and the tactics employed, an organization must be prepared to dedicate people and time to this effort. Developing and sharing a plan that spells out detailed strategies and timelines for implementation will smooth both communication and the implementation itself. Many agencies find it helpful to dedicate a employee to oversee the initiative, keep it on everyone’s radar, and move implementation forward. Implementation requires an investment of time throughout the organization, but it pays dividends by reducing the amount of time spent on ineffective and unnecessary work.