



Implementation Teams

Best Practices and Tools to Establish Implementation Teams

An implementation team is a group of stakeholders responsible for overseeing implementation and continuous improvement of a program or practice in order to achieve equitable outcomes. Implementation teams are different than advisory groups or oversight committees as they actively make decisions and plan for implementation, instead of primarily providing feedback. They are the organized group that supports every stage of implementation.

What Are Implementation Teams?

Implementation teams are the backbone of the implementation process. Common activities of implementation teams are to:

- engage relevant stakeholders (such as staff from different parts of an organization, youth, families and community members) in decision making;
- clearly define what is being implemented and identify necessary adaptations or changes for the context;
- establish support for staff implementing the intervention, program or practice;
- provide a process for measuring and improving fidelity;
- set goals and create strategies for achieving greater equity through implementation; and
- ensure the intervention, program or practice achieves and sustains its goals.

Without teams, an implementation effort ends up relying on individual leaders. Relying on a “solo hero” can limit stakeholder participation and buy-in and the program’s or practice’s alignment with the larger system in which it operates — leading to unsustainable efforts that often fall short of achieving equitable benefits for individuals and families.¹

When implementation challenges arise, the absence of a well-functioning implementation team may be a contributing factor. Implementation support practitioners can use the best practices and resources in this action guide to establish new implementation teams or strengthen the work of existing teams.

What Are Best Practices for Establishing and Sustaining Implementation Teams?

Create a Sustainable Teaming Structure

Creating a sustainable teaming structure requires incorporating inclusion and equity throughout the process. Teams can take on different forms depending on scope or size or project, available resources, project goals, objectives and guiding principles. Implementation support practitioners develop and coach teams that will be responsible for a change effort.

- **Build a small and skilled implementation team.** A typical implementation team should include six to 10 members. Team members should represent a variety of perspectives and complementary expertise, including organizational functions such as administrative, fiscal, programmatic and policy making, as well as key partners, community members or individuals and families.² For example, teams should have members that understand the program or practice from both the direct service perspective and the administrative perspective. It is also critical to include individuals with cultural and contextual knowledge and experience on the team. This may include direct service staff or individuals and families who receive the program or practice, if they wish to engage at this level. Collectively, the team should have expertise in:
 - the program or practice;
 - the culture and context in which the implementation effort will take place;
 - the development of implementation supports such as training, supervision and coaching, as well as data systems; and
 - key aspects of systems change, such as regulations, policy and funding.³

Members must have time and resources dedicated to participating on the team and have defined team duties.⁴ Team members should be compensated for participation. When a staff member is participating on a team as part of their work, the role should be included in their job description if possible. Implementation teams might also consider securing funding to compensate community members for their time and work when they are otherwise unpaid, in contrast to people who are participating on the team as part of their regular jobs. Completing a Composition Analysis Template⁵ that captures the competencies and characteristics of the team members can help to promote inclusivity and equity by illuminating gaps in representation and identifying needed perspectives.⁶

- **Engage diverse perspectives equally.** Making change in complex systems requires buy-in and commitment from diverse stakeholders. Team diversity (which should be considered in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, position with the organization, etc.) strengthens learning, a critical component for engaging staff and ensuring their sustained participation. Without a diverse and inclusive team, gaining buy-in will be an ongoing challenge. Ensuring all members of a diverse team can participate fully can be challenging given the power dynamics and historical relationships of different groups. Without

attention to power differentials, community member or client participation on a team can be superficial — or worse, an example of tokenism. Implementation teams can purposefully account for these factors by choosing times and meeting places that are available and accessible for both community members and organizational staff.

- **Outline the purpose of the group and the scope of work and deliverables for which the group will be held accountable.** A team charter should include:
 - The vision and purpose of the team;
 - The scope of work and deliverables for which the group will be held accountable;
 - The roles and responsibilities for all members, including expected effort;
 - The frequency of team meetings;
 - Communication protocols;
 - Available resources; and
 - Decision-making authority.⁷

The charter creates basic norms and clarity on how the team relates to other supporting implementation.⁸ It should be written so that it is understandable and accessible to all members of the team.

- **Develop internal and external leadership structures.** Implementation teams should have co-leadership (two or more designated leaders) to convene and guide the team’s work. Co-leadership is an intentional strategy to avoid the “solo hero” model described above.⁹ Co-leaders play a critical role in facilitating implementation team meetings to ensure productive, clear and honest communication among all team members. They meet ahead of each implementation team meeting to prepare the agenda and outline a facilitation plan that includes clear roles. Implementation teams should consider the selection of co-leaders as an opportunity for community partner leadership. Given that the roles of co-leaders and their individual levels of authority in an implementation effort may vary, implementation teams either need delegated authority for decision-making or access to departmental or organizational leaders who have the formal authority to make resource and policy decisions. These relationships between co-leaders and those with formal authority ensure the team’s decisions can be implemented when they require higher authority.
- **Develop linked implementation teams in large systems.** Large-scale or complex initiatives often encounter challenges that cannot be addressed at only one level of the system. For example, a community working to improve adolescent job readiness may face barriers that require support from regional and state policy leaders. The community implementation team alone cannot change the larger system that affects youth and families. In systems change efforts, implementation teams at each level of the system can facilitate alignment and reduce silos. Each implementation team in the system shares the same goal — for example, improving adolescent job readiness — but is accountable for activities specific to their position in the system.

Linked teams can also serve as a mechanism for equitable implementation. As linked teams and their members align across systems and sectors around a shared implementation goal or objective, such as ensuring all individuals or families have access to services that meet their needs and address their assets, they are presented with an opportunity to identify potential inequities related to access to care and support to engage in services. Because inequities experienced by individuals are often rooted in institutional and structural racism, inequities cannot be addressed solely at one level of the system. Linked teams can seek to identify and address community level challenges related to equitable implementation while also working to identify and address policies that limit access to care for particular groups of people, thereby perpetuating disparities in outcomes. For example, linked teams can use disaggregated data to conduct a root cause analysis to understand barriers to accessing services. By grounding the implementation work in equity considerations, teams can raise issues of structural racism in the systems in which they work and the communities in which they live.

A linked team structure can take on different forms. Two examples of linked implementation teams are shown below. In the first, a local effort is linked to regional and state level implementation teams working on the same goal. In the second, a place-based initiative uses a community implementation team to provide coordination and oversight for the initiative and strategy-specific teams to focus on individual aspects of the initiative, such as home visiting. In any linked teaming structure, each team must define its role and responsibilities, consider diverse membership and accessibility and develop strategies for coordination and communication.

Figure 1. Linked state, regional and local implementation teams



Figure 2. Linked community and strategy teams



Communication provides the crucial link between implementation teams. Individuals who sit on several teams can help the teams communicate with each other. For instance, in the linked community and strategy teams example, an agency manager might sit on the community implementation team and also on the home visiting team. On the community team, the manager can represent the home visiting work and raise awareness of successes and challenges relevant to the larger place-based effort; on the home visiting team, the same manager can share information about the larger place-based effort that is relevant to home visiting. Often in linked teaming structures for place-based work, co-leaders of strategy teams are part of the community implementation team to ensure feedback loops operate among teams. Alternatively, teams can create communication protocols that establish routine check-ins and create opportunities for shared problem solving across teams.

Ensure Effective Team Coordination and Communication

Implementation support practitioners help an implementation team to develop a charter to coordinate the team's work and specify the roles, responsibilities and goals of the team and its members. Charters can be used to establish norms and processes for the team's way of work, outline communication plans with stakeholders and orient new team members. One critical responsibility for the implementation team is engaging in two-way communication — sharing and receiving feedback — with stakeholders and other teams. If the communication processes are complex, the team might develop a separate communication plan to detail them.

- **Establish consistent meeting times and protocols.** Implementation teams should have regular, consistent meeting times when all members can attend. The meetings should follow procedures established by team members and described in the charter to use meetings effectively and achieve planned objectives.¹⁰
- **Establish protocols for stakeholder communication.** Implementation teams should have clear protocols for sharing information and communicating with stakeholders. Protocols should identify the various stakeholders with whom the team should communicate (including other linked teams, policymakers and community members), the circumstances in which the team should communicate, the type of information that is shared and specific methods of communication. Communication should flow in both directions, so that information is shared with and received from stakeholders. Including and honoring stakeholder feedback and perspective are key elements of successful communication. A common misstep in stakeholder communication occurs when teams seek feedback from community members but do not summarize the findings and share them back with the community. Structured communication protocols can help avoid such missteps and facilitate decision making and ongoing improvement throughout the implementation process across the service system. Teams should communicate at every phase of implementation about what is working and what is not working, and how those conclusions were drawn.

- **Define the team’s continuous quality improvement process.** Using disaggregated data to make decisions and improvements is a core function, so teams should have clearly defined processes for continuous quality improvement and consider having a team member with experience in CQI to help guide the process. Since not all team members will be experts in data use or quality improvement, the team should develop processes that are transparent and described in plain language. The team also should seek opportunities to develop team members’ skills in this area.
- **Establish policy-practice communication loops within and across systems.** Implementation teams help to build connections across the system with multiple relevant stakeholder groups, including government agencies, model developers, community partners, individuals and families, and, potentially, other systems. By serving as systems liaisons, teams can improve referral systems, coordinate the use of resources and promote learning across service providers.¹¹ They can also liaise with communities, beneficiaries and policymakers to communicate important information to system leaders to strengthen systems alignment and remove barriers. Communication loops also serve as an established, formal way to gather information and feedback from stakeholders and communicate changes that were made based on feedback. These policy–practice communication loops are a key aspect of successful implementation efforts. For example, teen pregnancy prevention programs are often delivered in schools by contractors who are not school system employees. Including a principal or another school official on the implementation team with contracted practitioners enables a policy–practice communication loop. Practitioners can point out implementation challenges — such as getting consent for students to participate in programs — to the team, and the school official can proactively engage parents to provide consent for their child’s participation. Practitioners can then close the loop by reporting back about whether the revised policy has resolved the challenge.

Build and Use Team Capacity for Implementation

- **Lead an inclusive intervention selection and adaptation process.** Implementation teams are responsible for supporting and coordinating all aspects of selecting, implementing, adapting and sustaining an intervention. This includes collecting data on specific interventions and engaging stakeholders in the learning and selection process.¹² As implementation progresses, the team continuously assesses fidelity to improve the intervention and its infrastructure and identifies barriers and solutions.¹³ Implementation teams also make data-informed decisions about how to adapt the intervention, including adaptations that incorporate the culture and experiences of participants.
- **Identify and resolve gaps in organizational infrastructure.** Implementation teams assess, coordinate, improve and secure resources for the competencies, policies and resources needed to successfully implement the intervention. For example, implementation teams ensure resources are in place to build the competency of staff and relevant community partners to refine their practice through coaching and training. As team members support implementation of a new or refined practice, they are responsible for identifying

gaps in the infrastructure necessary at the program, organizational and systems levels and for resolving those gaps by pulling together the necessary resources for capacity building.¹⁴

- **Use data for decision making and continuous improvement.** Implementation teams are responsible for supporting the design and execution of the regular use of disaggregated data for decision making and continuous improvement. This includes creating a system to collect and use program, fidelity and outcome data to inform improvement. Program data provide information on administrative and fiscal details; fidelity data provide information on whether the agency is implementing the intervention as intended; and outcome data provide information on short- and long-term outcomes. Dedicating time for reflecting or debriefing on a regular basis promotes shared learning and improvement.¹⁵
- **Provide opportunities for team members to grow and learn.** Research suggests that team members are more likely to stay committed to team participation if they have opportunities to grow and learn. These findings indicate that shared leadership and peer-to-peer coaching, as well as learning through tasks, produce the greatest growth for members.^{16,17} A team of diverse stakeholders will not all have the same skills and knowledge. The team should identify areas for growth and potential training resources to meet those needs. For example, a team might identify a need for expertise in trauma-informed care and seek out resources for members to learn more. Sustained engagement is important for teams to be effective.

What Principles and Competencies are Needed to Establish and Sustain Implementation Teams?

Implementation support practitioners frequently engage in efforts to select team members, facilitate team meeting, and improve team functioning. Development of inclusive teams with multiple actors and perspectives, including members of the community and focus population, fosters opportunities for stakeholder leadership and engagement in activities such as implementation planning, communication, problem solving and data-driven decision-making.¹⁸ Specific principles and competencies¹⁹ relevant to supporting implementation team development and activities are described below.

Principles

Principles guide and underpin implementation support practitioners' work.

- **Be empathetic:** Approach team building with regard for all team members.
- **Be curious:** Ask questions.
- **Advance equity:** Integrate equity components.
- **Embrace-cross disciplinary approaches:** Appreciate diversity of expertise and experience.

Competencies

Competencies are the necessary knowledge, resources and skills for the implementation support practitioners' work.

- **Grow and sustain relationships:** Have difficult conversations with team members and be open to feedback.
- **Facilitation:** Ensure full participation of team members.
- **Address power differentials:** Use facilitation techniques to make power structures visible and to protect all voices in the implementation process, including all implementation team members.
- **Co-learn:** Foster the team's development as a space for new ideas to emerge.
- **Co-design:** Support collaborative implementation planning and co-development within the team.
- **Tailor support:** Work with implementation team members to select, combine and tailor their implementation strategies.
- **Develop teams:** Coach teams to improve team functioning.
- **Cultivate Leadership and Champions:** Grow team members as implementation leaders and champions of culture change.

What Tools or Resources Are Available to Establish and Sustain Implementation Teams?

Implementation support practitioners can use the following resources to support team formation:

1. **Implementation Teams Getting Started Worksheet:** This planning tool can help make sure the right people are on the implementation team to do the work. The tool can be used by the organization forming the team or by funders to support teaming among their grantees.
2. **Identifying Team Competencies Worksheet:** This worksheet can help organizations assess whether implementation teams have the capacity needed to support effective implementation.
3. **Implementation Team Charter Template and Sample:** This template can be used by implementation teams to draft a team charter. A sample charter is also provided.
4. **Communication Protocol Worksheet:** This tool can be used to develop linked communication protocols for new or existing programs and interventions.
5. **Team Meeting Agenda Template:** This template can be used to standardize team meeting agendas.

6. **Before Action Review (BAR) and After Action Review (AAR) Template:** This template, created by Fourth Quadrant Partners, can be used to plan for and reflect on implementation team meetings. The template covers identification of intended results, potential challenges to achieving those results and lessons that can be applied to future meetings. Further information and instructions for the BAR/AAR can be found at <http://www.4qppartners.com/4qp-el-platform.html>

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- ⁴ National Implementation Research Network's Active Implementation Hub. (n.d.). Topic 4: Establishing implementation teams. Retrieved from <https://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/module-3/topic-4>
- ⁵ A composition analysis template is provided in *Implementation Action Guide #2: Assess Implementation Infrastructure*.
- ⁶ The Stakeholder Engagement Guide in *Implementation Action Guide #1: Assess Fit and Feasibility* is also a useful resource in understanding who is on your implementation team and what gaps might still exist.
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