

# Implementation Infrastructure

## *Best Practices and Tools to Assess Implementation Infrastructure*

### Introduction

Implementation drivers refer to the key infrastructure elements needed to support practice, organizational, and systems change necessary for successful implementation of a program or practice. All aspects of infrastructure for the program or practice should be developed specifically to ensure successful implementation that advances improved and equitable outcomes for all individuals and families.

### What is Implementation Infrastructure?

Implementation drivers are visible components of infrastructure that ensure the development of skilled staff and a strong organization and system.<sup>1</sup> Implementation drivers capture infrastructure elements that successfully implemented programs and practices have in common.<sup>1</sup> They fall into two categories:

- competency drivers, which are systems for hiring, training and coaching staff and assessing fidelity to the intervention, program or practice; and
- organization drivers, which are systems for data use, business operations and partnerships that create a hospitable environment for implementation.

Competency drivers ensure staff have the capacity and the confidence to implement with quality. Organization drivers ensure that operational support and resources match staff needs. Those implementing programs often overlook these drivers, but they are necessary to accelerate and sustain momentum; they drive implementation forward by supporting staff at both an individual level and an organizational level. Implementation drivers help staff achieve and maintain fidelity and ensure implementation processes are fully and visibly integrated into an organization's operations and culture so that everyone involved can sustain the effort.

Implementation support practitioners can support teams to conduct an assessment of these drivers at the outset of implementation and identify what support is needed to begin. Assessment typically occurs in the installation or initial implementation stages and might also be helpful if implementation is not progressing as expected, such as when staff are experiencing challenges using newly learned skills in complex service environments.

Organizations can assess their infrastructure to better understand current functioning and identify opportunities for improvement, using the results to develop a plan to build or strengthen existing infrastructure.

## From Assessment to Improvement

Implementation support practitioners can help organizations to use the results from the assessment to make improvements that will ultimately ensure greater alignment of their internal systems. Here's an example:

An organization completes an infrastructure assessment and learns that its current human resources system is not set up to support effective implementation of a new program. Job descriptions for staff who carry out the program include only generic skills and abilities, rather than the specific skills and responsibilities required for the new program. The organization uses a generic interview protocol for all staff, instead of interview questions that assess competencies relevant for the program. These human resource policies and procedures are critical components of the infrastructure needed to make sure that staff can implement the new program well. Improvement. In response to these assessment results, the organization develops a plan to revise the job descriptions and the interview protocol to include information on the specific skills and abilities required of the program.

## What Are Best Practices for Assessing Infrastructure?

An infrastructure assessment is a critical early step in developing an implementation plan. It helps everyone on the team understand the infrastructure needed for implementation and identifies opportunities to further build this infrastructure. Infrastructure assessments are considered action assessments rather than evaluative instruments. For example, an assessment can be used to initiate actions such as changing policy or building data systems but should never be used to rank or grade organizations.

Implementation support practitioners can consider the following best practices as they prepare to work with organizations to assess their infrastructure:

- **Clearly identify the intervention, program or practice** that will be the focus of the assessment.
  - Everyone participating in the assessment should know what the subject of the assessment is and be familiar with it. Emphasize that you are assessing infrastructure for a specific program or practice, and not general infrastructure.
  - At least one participant should have deep knowledge of what is being implemented, including guiding principles and core components. It can sometimes be challenging to find this level of knowledge within an organization, particularly if the program is new and staff are unfamiliar with it. In these cases, it can be useful to include a program developer or purveyor in the assessment who is willing to contribute their expertise.
  - Difficulty finding someone with deep knowledge can be a sign that the program is not well defined or understood. If this is the case, you might want to consider further defining the program or practice prior to assessing infrastructure.

- **Gather a team with diverse perspectives** to participate in the assessment.
  - The team should include relevant senior leaders; managers; staff who provide direct services, such as teachers or social workers; and families and community members. Having a racially/ethnically diverse team with diverse perspectives complete the assessment is important because people who work at an organization will see different aspects of infrastructure in their daily experiences from individuals and families who participate in services. And within an organization, a senior leader’s perspective on the hiring process will be different from that of a newly hired staff member who recently went through an interview and orientation.
  - Communicate the purpose of and the process for the assessment with participants in advance. It is useful for those contributing to the assessment to understand why they are there and what their role is.
- **Use the assessment data for planning.**
  - Identify priority drivers for improvement.
  - Brainstorm potential strategies to strengthen implementation drivers.
  - Prioritize identified strategies, including both “quick wins” (strategies that can be executed rapidly, with low investment of resources) and longer-term strategies. Define who is responsible for each strategy and what resources are available. The Implementation Drivers Action Plan can be used to document these details.

All aspects of infrastructure for the program or practice must be developed specifically to address the needs and strengths of the focus population in order to ensure successful implementation that advances improved and equitable outcomes for all individuals and families. In addition to the best practices above for assessing infrastructure, organizations should consider whether infrastructure advances such improved and equitable outcomes. Considerations include:

- The focus population and community partners should be engaged in the selection of programs and practices to be implemented and in the development of infrastructure to support implementation of the program or practice.
- Relevant staff should be provided with training on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and how to apply these concepts in their implementation of the program or practice.
- All data (programmatic, fidelity, outcome, etc.) should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity where appropriate, as well as by sub-population characteristics (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, geography).
- Organization policies, procedures and processes should be assessed to determine their impact on race equity and inclusion. Examples of organizational self-assessments include the Racial Equity Impact Assessment, Race Matters Self-Assessment, and Tool for Organizational Self-Assessment Related to Racial Equity.

## Assessment Options

This guide includes three options for assessing infrastructure: 1) the Qualitative Drivers Assessment, 2) the Drivers Best Practices Checklist; and 3) the Drivers Best Practices Assessment. Consider the context for implementation, available resources for planning and facilitation and intended outcomes when deciding which assessment to use.

The following list summarizes the three assessments:

- **Qualitative Drivers Assessment**
  - Infrastructure is not well defined.
  - Replication requires infrastructure to be well defined.
  - Relationships are new and trust needs to be built.
  - The context needs to be better understood before a quantitative assessment can be administered.
- **Drivers Best Practices Checklist**
  - Resources available for facilitation are limited.
  - The organization cannot prioritize a full assessment at this time.
  - Implementation is still in early stages.
  - The organization would like a starting place for future assessments, should they decide to move forward.
- **Drivers Best Practices Assessment**
  - The intervention, program or practice being assessed is well defined.
  - Multiple sites are replicating the program practice or initiative.
  - There is a need to assess changes in infrastructure over time.
  - Implementation has progressed to a point where understanding the relationship between fidelity and infrastructure is possible and desired.

A **Qualitative Drivers Assessment** can help the team to understand and define the infrastructure needed for effective implementation, as well as potential gaps. This assessment includes a series of open-ended questions and related prompts for teams to consider as they think about the infrastructure they need. It can be used as a discussion guide by teams or as an interview protocol administered by an implementation support practitioner or external facilitator.

The Qualitative Drivers Assessment is typically used when teams do not have a clear sense of what it takes to implement an intervention, program or practice. The flexibility of this assessment allows them to consider what infrastructure is needed to support effective implementation, as well as what infrastructure is currently in place. For example, a team may be exploring implementation of a promising practice that has only been previously implemented once or twice, with significant involvement from the developer. The findings from the assessment should inform the development of an action plan.

The **Drivers Checklist** is a self-guided tool that enables teams to assess existing infrastructure. It can be used as an initial screening of infrastructure strengths and gaps and allows teams to develop a shared understanding of the infrastructure needed to support their program or practice. As the team works through the checklist items, conversations about whether or not the needed infrastructure is in place will give them some direction as they consider where to focus their efforts. For example, if the team’s discussion uncovers a lack of training opportunities for staff who will carry out the intervention, program or practice, they might decide to put resources toward training. Teams may formalize these recommendations in an action plan.

Some teams may prefer to use the **Drivers Best Practices Assessment**, a quantitative assessment of implementation drivers that is administered by a skilled facilitator who is trained in and has experience with the assessment. The facilitator will guide the participants through the assessment process and ensure that the assessment is informed by diverse perspectives within the organization. An ideal facilitator has knowledge of implementation drivers and is skilled in administering the assessment. Previous administration data have indicated that the facilitator is essential in supporting the assessment’s consensus scoring; scores have greater validity when determined through a facilitated conversation. Like the Drivers Best Practices Checklist, the results are used by teams to build an action plan to improve infrastructure.

The facilitated Drivers Best Practices Assessment is more extensive and time-consuming and will provide more complete and nuanced results. If the team chooses this approach, securing a facilitator is a critical first step. The facilitator will guide the team in preparing for the assessment and action planning after the assessment. For help with identifying a facilitator, contact the Collaborative on Implementation Practice.

## **What Principles and Competencies are Needed to Assess Implementation Infrastructure?**

Implementation support practitioners can play a pivotal role in ensuring both successful implementation and equitable outcomes by promoting a focus on infrastructure development early on. Common activities when engaging in infrastructure assessment may include facilitated discussion, the use of data to drive ongoing improvement and support for feedback loops that connect teams and leadership.<sup>2</sup> Specific principles and competencies<sup>3</sup> relevant to assessing implementation infrastructure are described below.

## Principles

*Principles guide and underpin implementation support practitioners' work.*

- **Be empathetic:** Approach infrastructure assessment with regard for all stakeholders as legitimate, respected and valuable contributors.
- **Be curious:** Ask questions and explore the multifaceted nature of systems.
- **Advance equity:** Integrate equity components into assessment.
- **Use critical thinking:** Explore assumptions and mental models.

## Competencies

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

- **Understand context:** Involve diverse stakeholders from throughout the system in the assessment process.
- **Address power differentials:** Use facilitation techniques to make power structures visible and protect all partners' voices.
- **Co-design:** Work with stakeholders to assess and plan for infrastructure.
- **Grow and sustain relationships:** Have difficult conversations with partners and be open to feedback.
- **Facilitation:** Ensure full participation of all relevant partners.
- **Communication:** Communicate assessment findings.

## What Tools or Resources Are Available to Assess Infrastructure?

Implementation support practitioners can use the following resources to assess implementation infrastructure:

1. The **Qualitative Drivers Assessment:** This assessment tool can be used to help define the infrastructure needed to implement an intervention, program or practice.
2. The **Drivers Best Practices Checklist:** This self-assessment tool can be used as an initial diagnostic or with grantees who want to complete a self-assessment before embarking on the full, facilitated assessment.
3. The **Drivers Best Practices Assessment:** This assessment tool can be used during any stage of implementation to assess the extent to which sites have the necessary infrastructure in place to use a specific program or practice.

Implementation support practitioners can also use the following supporting resources:

1. **Drivers Best Practices Tip Sheets:** These resources provide brief information and tips for installing and improving drivers best practices to support the development of staff competency and hospitable organizations and systems.

2. **Drivers Action Plan:** This template helps a team identify and plan for strategies for strengthening their infrastructure based on results of the Drivers Best Practices Assessment or Drivers Best Practices Checklist
3. **Composition Analysis Template:** This template is used to capture and reflect on the characteristics of the team completing the assessment, including levels of authority, experience, knowledge of the subject and demographics.

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<sup>1</sup> Metz, A., Naoom, S.F., Halle, T. & Bartley L. (2015). An integrated stage-based framework for implementation of early childhood programs and systems. *OPRE Research Brief OPRE 2015 48*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>2</sup> Metz, A., Louison, L., Burke, K., Albers, B., & Ward, C. (2020). *Implementation support practitioner profile: Guiding principles and core competencies for implementation practice*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
<https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/implementation-support-practitioner-profile>

<sup>3</sup> Metz, A., Louison, L., Burke, K., Albers, B., & Ward, C. (2020).