

Implementation Plans

Best Practices and Tools to Develop an Implementation Plan

Introduction

Implementation plans, as the name suggests, are intended to plan for and guide implementation across the four stages: exploration, installation, initial implementation and full implementation. More specifically, implementation plans identify goals, select and align strategies to address each goal, and identify reasonable timelines and person(s) responsible for carrying out the strategies. Implementation plans can be used to assess progress toward stage-based benchmarks and may need to be adjusted as implementation advances and circumstances change.

What is an Implementation Plan?

An implementation plan is a tool that implementation teams use to track goals, strategies, appropriate progress benchmarks and reflect on implementation progress. Rather than project management plans, which are often driven by leadership or upper management and do not evolve with the implementation process, implementation plans supported by implementation teams promote the use of multiple perspectives and distributed leadership, which increases the likelihood that strategies will match implementation goals. Developing an implementation plan can help teams determine appropriate strategies to achieve each implementation goal, establish feasible timelines for enacting the strategies and identify clear roles and responsibilities. Whether you are developing something new, scaling an established program or practice or supporting an initiative comprising multiple programs and practices, successful implementation takes care and attention. Thoughtful implementation planning is key to achieving the desired results of a program or initiative.

Consider the current stage or stages of implementation to match implementation goals and strategies. For example:

- During exploration, the needs and assets of a focus population are assessed and compared to the fit and feasibility of potential programs to build on strengths and address needs within the current organizational and system context. An implementation plan can help a team ensure that timelines for exploration activities are feasible and the appropriate partners are involved in the process. It can also outline key exploration outcomes including the acceptability and appropriateness of a potential program or multiple programs that are part of an initiative.
- Installation is a planning and preparatory period dedicated to developing infrastructure that will support a specific program, practice or larger initiative, including building practitioner and organizational capacity. The implementation plan can be used to identify and prioritize

goals related to the development of infrastructure, team activities and communication protocols needed to support implementation of the program. In this stage, a key implementation outcome is adoption of the program, practice or initiative. It is particularly important for teams to surface adaptive challenges that are likely to arise in the course of initiating or implementing a new program, practice or initiative — and to plan for addressing them.

- Initial implementation begins when staff initiate use of the program or practice or parts of an initiative; it is a time of learning, with attention to using data for continuous improvement and for identifying and addressing adaptive issues that may affect implementation. As improvement efforts are identified and infrastructure needs potentially shift, an implementation plan helps in tracking changes over time. Initial implementation outcomes including feasibility, reach, fidelity and implementation cost can also be identified in the plan.
- Finally, full implementation occurs when the majority of practitioners can skillfully deliver the program or practice or all parts of an initiative, and the focus population experiences improved outcomes or results. An implementation plan can support sustainability in detailing the ongoing infrastructure, team activities and communication strategies in place, as well as any efficiencies that have been developed.

What Are Best Practices for Developing an Implementation Plan?

Implementation support practitioners can work with implementation teams to carry out the following process to develop an implementation plan.

- **Identify the implementation stage(s).** Use the implementation stages to assess a program or practice's current status and identify what stage of implementation the effort is currently in. It is possible that implementation is in more than one stage at the same time. This is particularly true for initiatives implementing more than one program or practice. Therefore, a team may develop an implementation plan that spans multiple stages based on the current status of a program or practice or parts of an initiative.
- **Use implementation diagnostics.** Diagnostics such as the Implementation Stages Planning Tool and infrastructure assessments, to identify goals at each stage of implementation that are critical to making progress toward benchmarks and implementation outcomes.
- **Match the overall result and implementation goal with an appropriate strategy.** Implementation strategies are the activities we conduct to make progress toward implementation benchmarks and outcomes at each stage¹. However, goals and strategies are often mismatched², and we often rely too heavily on commonly used strategies — such as training — even when they are not aligned with our implementation goals. Proper alignment between goals and strategies can increase the likelihood of attention to unique implementation needs, resulting in greater implementation success. For example, if an implementation goal is effective bidirectional communication with external partners, the team should identify a method of communication that is feasible and meaningful to the

identified partners (such as texting or social media to reach youth and young adult stakeholders or program participants).

- **Identify realistic and feasible timelines for carrying out each strategy.** Developing timelines can assist with identifying incremental tasks that may need to occur to reach milestones. Revisit those timelines periodically to ensure they remain realistic and adjust as needed if unforeseen events arise.
- **Identify person(s) responsible for carrying out each strategy.** Determine which team members or external partners have the ability and time to carry out each strategy. Some implementation strategies may require more than one or two people to coordinate. Clearly identifying responsible parties develops role clarity among members — ensuring there is agreement on the authority, responsibilities and tasks held by each individual.
- **Identify the resources needed to carry out each strategy.** For example, if communication with youth via text is the strategy, a practitioner will need a phone with unlimited text messages and time to engage youth in text conversations. Additionally, organizational policies regarding communication with participants might need to be revised to support this new form of engagement.
- **Anticipate adaptive challenges.** Adaptive challenges often involve differing views of the problem and differing perspectives on what constitutes a viable solution. Given the complex nature of implementation goals within a fluid context — possibly including changing stakeholders — it is critical to anticipate potential adaptive challenges when planning for implementation. As teams identify strategies to address their goal, they should proactively consider what kinds of adaptive challenges they might encounter in their context. For example, if the team decides that engaging diverse stakeholders is a strategy to gain buy-in, team members should be prepared to address potential power dynamics and voices that may dominate the conversation, manage expectations around stakeholders' perceived decision-making authority, and encounter and use data that do not support what the team was hoping to hear. Teams that anticipate adaptive challenges will be more nimble and responsive when they arise.
- **Identify benchmarks of success.** These should be guided by the appropriate stage-based outcomes. Action Guide #5 on identifying implementation stages provides additional guidance on stage-based outcomes.

What Principles and Competencies are Needed to Develop an Implementation Plan?

Implementation support practitioners can facilitate the implementation process by supporting the co-creation of implementation plans. Implementation plans should be collaboratively developed by the implementation team together with community partners and members of the focus population who will have a role in the implementation of the selected program or practice. Specific principles and competencies³ relevant to developing an implementation plan are described below.

Principles

Principles guide and underpin implementation support practitioners' work.

- **Be curious:** Ask questions, tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity.
- **Advance equity:** Integrate equity components.
- **Be committed:** Bring patience, resilience and a willingness to challenge the status quo.
- **Use critical thinking:** Explore diverse elements in implementation planning.

Competencies

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

- **Co-design:** Support collaborative implementation planning involving all relevant stakeholders.
- **Broker:** Identify stakeholders not yet part of implementation, seek to understand their disconnect and identify strategies for inclusion and power sharing.
- **Address power differentials:** Seek and gain buy-in from formal and informal leaders.
- **Build capacity:** Work with stakeholders to assess capacity strengths and needs.
- **Use implementation strategies:** Collaborate with stakeholders to assess and discuss the appropriateness of different implementation resources.
- **Grow and sustain relationships:** Regulate distress by creating space for stakeholders to discuss challenges and dispute assumptions.
- **Facilitation:** Serve as a facilitator for planning.
- **Cultivate leaders and champions:** Seek ways to develop stakeholder-centered leadership through implementation activities.

What Tools or Resources Are Available to Develop an Implementation Plan?

Implementation Support Practitioners can use the following resource to develop an implementation plan:

1. **Implementation Plan Template and Examples:** This tool is designed to guide implementation teams through the development of an implementation plan that identifies goals and strategies for each stage of implementation. Three examples are provided to illustrate how the implementation plan can be used to support implementation of programs, practices and initiatives.

¹ Proctor, E.K., Powell, B.J., & McMillen, J.C. (2013). Implementation strategies: Recommendations for specifying and reporting. *Implementation Science, 8*, 1–11. doi:10.1186/1748-5908-8-139

² Powell, B.J., Beidas, R.S., Lewis, C.C., Aarons, G., ... McMandell, D.S. (2018). Methods to improve the selection and tailoring of implementation strategies. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services Research, 44*, 177–194.

³ 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>