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PracticeBRIEF

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The Learn Phase: Creating Sustainable Change in Human Services Programs

By using the Learn, Innovate, Improve process (also known as LI^2), human services leaders can intentionally launch and systematically guide program change, incorporating evidence and research methods throughout the process. The first phase of LI^2 (Learn) lays the foundation for successful change in two ways: by (1) clarifying the reason for seeking change and the problem to be addressed, and (2) assessing the program environment's readiness for change. Typically, practitioners and researchers collaborate during the Learn phase to constructively analyze a program's strengths and challenges, and discuss opportunities for change and innovation. Even when program leaders have a clear sense of the intended change, the Learn phase can inform and guide a sustainable implementation process.

This brief serves to: (1) situate the Learn phase in the context of a larger systematic, evidence-informed framework for program change; (2) give practical guidance to readers who wish to use the Learn phase to guide improvement; and (3) offer examples of how the process can work in human services programs.

Resources to support LI^2 and build local capacity

This practice brief is part of a series of products about the Learn, Innovate, Improve process designed to help program stakeholders understand and use LI^2 to improve human services programs. An overview brief offers an introduction to the entire LI^2 approach. Separate practice guides are available for each of the three phases: this one, focused on the Learn phase, and two others focused, respectively, on the Innovate and Improve phases.

Programs interested in using LI^2 may consider partnering with a researcher who knows the process and has substantive expertise in the program area.

WHY LI^2? THE MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

The LI^2 process stems from a desire to more effectively use and produce evidence through more meaningful collaboration between human services program staff and researchers. This approach seeks to overcome some of the persistent challenges programs and researchers commonly encounter in their attempts to inform practice with research, such as the limited practical relevance of research publications and clearinghouses; differences in communication styles (research "speak" and practice "speak"), which impede collaboration; and the lack of program capacity to systematically use an analytic, evidence-driven process for change and improvement. LI^2 repurposes and reframes existing, reliable research methods into an understandable and replicable series of steps. LI^2 gives careful attention to high-quality, context-driven implementation—in other words, it focuses heavily on designing for or adapting to the local environment. Through the activities in each of its three phases, LI^2 aims to make research and science more accessible, and to generate timelier, more reliable information for decision making.

LEARN, INNOVATE, IMPROVE: A SYSTEMATIC YET FLEXIBLE PROCESS FOR USING AND BUILDING EVIDENCE IN PROGRAM CHANGE

Learn is the starting point of the three-phase LI^2 process, which is designed to let decision makers take both a wide and deep view of prospective changes before they implement

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them. By clarifying the motivation for change, understanding the underlying problem, and assessing the environment's readiness for change, this approach can help program leaders increase the likelihood that any change will be well implemented, integrated with the existing program, sustainable, and scalable.

The information and insights generated in the Learn phase directly inform the next phase of LI², Innovate, which focuses on identifying, prioritizing, and designing a solution that is informed by research evidence, behavioral and social science, and practice wisdom. The Innovate phase leads to a *road map for change*: a detailed plan articulating new strategies; specifying changes in beliefs, behaviors, skills, or relationships among program staff and clients; anticipating particular outcomes; and naming the contextual factors (or moderators) expected to influence success. Many of these important moderators are first identified in the Learn phase.

LI² is a collaborative approach to change that involves staff at all levels in the organization. In fact, the Learn phase begins with listening to and learning from program staff—particularly those on the front lines of service delivery—to better understand how proposed changes might work in practice. The LI² process also aims to build program leaders' and staff's capacity for using and institutionalizing this analytic approach. The active involvement of program leaders and staff alongside researchers in this process contributes to a robust and transformative research-practice partnership.

Who can use LI²?

A broad array of public and private sector human services practitioners can benefit from and use the LI² process. Human services include the variety of programs designed to help people lead successful lives - for example, workforce development and employment services, safety net programs, child welfare services, early childhood education programs, and healthy family programs, among others.

STEPS OF THE LEARN PHASE

Before embarking on a change process, it is important for key stakeholders to understand and agree on the "why"—that is, to articulate a shared motivation for change. The "why" is logically linked to the problem at hand. **What is the issue or set of issues to be addressed? Why is this change a priority?** Answers to these questions may, at face value, seem simple; however, a deeper investigation is likely to reveal some surprising insights and diverse perspectives about the priorities and issues motivating change.

1. Unpacking the motivation for change

The Learn phase aligns with the natural progression that takes place when program managers recognize a need for change or identify a new priority and decide to take action. Program staff begin the Learn process with a dialogue about why there is a need for change and what problem needs to be addressed. Without a clear and shared understanding of the cause for change, efforts to improve the program may be disjointed or lack buy-in from the full team. This first step is intended to bring key stakeholders together for an open discussion of the factors that each person sees as a driver for change.

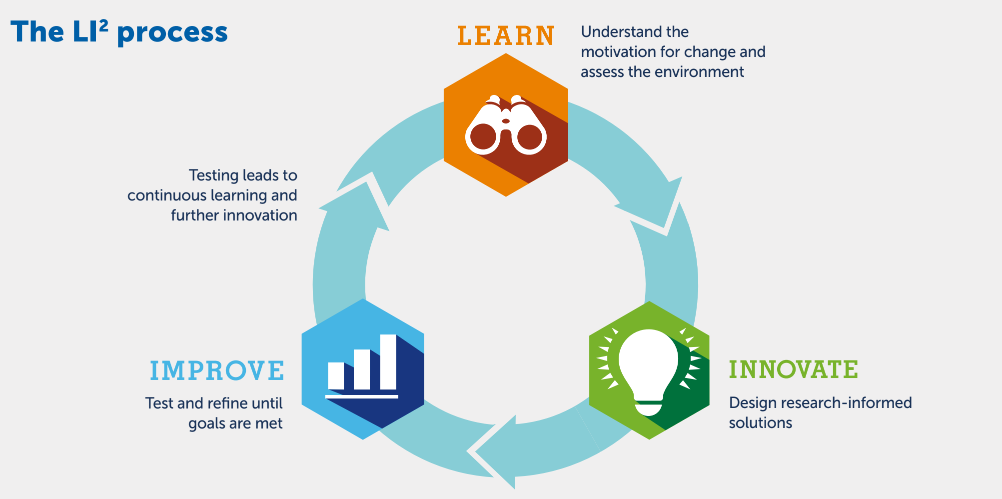

Figure 1

☑ What aspect(s) of the program are we targeting for change? Who is involved or affected? ☑ What problem are we trying to solve through change? Is it within our control? ☑ How do we know there is a problem? What information tells us there is a need for change? ☑ What would success look like three months, six months, or one year from now? How will we know we succeeded?	☑ Create space for individual and group reflection and sharing, and encourage participation through activities where everyone has a voice ☑ Pay attention to areas of agreement and diversity in opinions ☑ Note areas of uncertainty that could be investigated in detail during an assessment of the program environment

Table 1. Unpacking the motivation for change

It is important to include diverse perspectives from within (and sometimes outside of) the organization. In general, this conversation should generate insights about the status quo of program operations and performance, the underlying problem(s), and the team's aspirations for improvement. Table 1 outlines possible discussion questions and tips for facilitating this initial dialogue.

Table 2 has two examples of human services programs' stated motivations for change, which were clarified through the Learn phase of LI². Identifying the motivation for change informs the next step in this phase: an assessment of the program environment. Having clarified their reasons for change and the specific problems to be addressed, program leaders can then focus the assessment process on relevant aspects of the environment.

2. Listening and learning: assessing the program environment

Another key objective of the Learn phase is to take stock of the program environment in order

La Plata County (Colorado) Department of Human Services

A team of service providers and the department director identified limited client engagement and follow-through as persistent challenges to the success of the program, which was designed to help parents in this rural mountain community find family-sustaining jobs. The Learn process highlighted systemic transportation barriers and poor accessibility to public transportation options as key contributors to the problem; however, an underlying problem that the team felt they could address was clients' ambivalence, fear, motivation, and uncertainty in overcoming their transportation obstacles to engage with program services.

Vermont Department for Children and Families

Administrators of the state's Reach Up program used the Learn process to bring cohesion and focus to their program, which provides temporary cash assistance and employment services to low-income parents. The Learn process highlighted a relatively resource-rich service environment and a strong link to whole-family and mental health services, but noted a misalignment between the formal and informal messaging of the program. The Vermont team decided to focus more narrowly on revisiting and sharpening the Reach Up program's mission and vision to help frame a more precise and meaningful set of program outcomes on which to focus their efforts.

Table 2. Examples of the motivation for change

Organizational structure and context	Service delivery process	Goals and performance
• Organizational charts and supervisory structure • Caseload distribution and frontline staff roles • Number and demographics of clients served • Community partners and players	• Process diagrams and flowcharts • Program materials and handouts for both internal and public use • Staff manuals or other training supports	• Program philosophy and goals • Performance benchmarks and accountability standards for staff and clients • Performance data and metrics

Table 3. Useful information sources for the program environmental assessment

to understand how various factors (both within and beyond practitioners' control) are contributing to the existing problem(s) and might affect possible solutions. Human services programs are complex operations, involving the coordination of many moving parts in response to clients' evolving needs. All phases of service delivery tend to be interconnected, particularly those that involve the client. A proposed change may relate to one narrow aspect of service delivery—for example, where, when, and how eligibility and intake activities are conducted. Or, change may affect the broader operation of a program—for example, implementing a new approach to case management. In either case, it is critical to examine how seemingly unrelated processes might be contributing to the problem, and could in turn support or inhibit the success of any changes. For example, the nature of forms used by frontline staff may appear unrelated to their ability to provide case management, but if the forms are burdensome or duplicative, they could result in inadequate time for service delivery to be carried out successfully.

The environmental assessment is grounded in qualitative research methods, which are designed to generate information about staff culture and practices as well as client perspectives and behaviors. This information helps interpret the perceived need for change and the stated problems within the broader context of the program. It also helps assess the extent to which the environment is ready to support and sustain the proposed change. An internal evaluator or an external partner (such as a local researcher) may help program leaders complete an environmental assessment by providing a perspective that is not steeped in the day-to-day of program operations.

The process can involve semi-structured interviews, observations, and/or focus groups with select program leaders, staff, clients, and other stakeholders as needed. The assessment process may also involve observations of service delivery, an analysis of administrative data, or a workflow/business process analysis, as needed. Table 3 identifies some information sources that might be useful to review before the assessment.

The topics of interviews and focus groups will vary based on the type of human services program and the nature of the issues under consideration. In general, there are at least five broad topics that commonly promote a strong understanding of the program environment: (1) community context, (2) program context, (3) infrastructure and staffing, (4) service delivery process, and (5) performance management. Table 4 has some example questions for each category.

Community context

- What are some of the specific challenges faced by those you serve in this community? How would you describe the local economy?
- How would you describe the clients/families you serve?
- How would you describe the accessibility and availability of local social services?
- Are there any external stakeholders who influence your decision-making or services?

Program context

- What are the overarching goals of your program? What do you hope to achieve?
- How successful would you say you have been in achieving those goals?
- Where would you like to see your program one year from now?
- What are the major sources of funding for your organization?
- To what extent does your organization's budget allow for discretionary changes in spending? Are there any particularly relevant constraints with respect to your budget?

Infrastructure and staffing

- How would you describe your role and responsibilities?
- How would you describe your workload—is it manageable given program goals and your responsibilities?
- How would you describe the staff culture?
- How would you describe your general stress level at work?
- To what extent do you have opportunities for professional development, mentoring, trainings, or other support?
- What would you say is the biggest asset or strength of your team?
- Where would you like to see development, growth, or improvement in your team?
- What are the key skills necessary to succeed in your position?
- What are the main activities that make up your work day?

Service delivery process

- Who are the players involved in service delivery?
- To what extent do staff communicate and interact with one another?
- How, if at all, do you determine who is eligible to receive your services?
- How would you describe the service delivery process for clients?
- To what extent are services individualized for each client?
- Are there any major service gaps for the clients you serve?
- To what extent do you think the services you are able to offer align with the organization's goals?
- How would you describe the organization's approach to service delivery?
- How would you describe the relationship between direct service staff and clients?
- What expectations do you have of your clients with respect to engaging in your program?
- What are the common challenges or obstacles you encounter in delivering services?

Performance management

- What data system do you use to manage cases?
- How do you monitor your performance or measure progress toward your program goals?
- What are the key performance indicators you are held accountable to?
- What are the primary client outcomes of interest?
- How is staff performance appraised—for managers, supervisors, and direct service staff?
- What types of data would be helpful to manage the program better?
- What information could help you do your job more effectively?
- How do you see your performance fitting into the program's overall performance?

Table 4. Sample categories and general questions used in a program environmental assessment[1]

[1] Note: This is not a comprehensive or exhaustive list of questions necessary for a successful program environmental assessment, nor do all of these questions need to be asked; instead, it is a starting point. The lines of inquiry and specific probes used should be tailored to the change under consideration, the issues at hand, and the specific program.

A helpful assessment of the program environment draws on the principles of behavioral science and implementation research—two important lenses through which to consider an organization's capacities, infrastructure, and processes—as well as the behaviors and perspectives of those who make up the organization. Several excellent resources can help program leaders apply these lenses to the assessment process, such as this guide[1] on implementation drivers or this guide[2] on applying behavioral insights to program design.

At the conclusion of the assessment, program leaders and staff discuss the insights generated by this process, which typically fall into three broad categories: (1) strengths, (2) challenges, and (3) opportunities relative to the proposed change and problem(s) to be solved. In order to sustain momentum, the team ideally debriefs about the assessment process soon after it is complete. The primary purpose of the assessment is not to produce an exhaustive description of everything that was heard and learned, but rather to generate focused feedback about how ready the program environment is to support specific changes.

The Learn phase as a whole is designed to give program leaders and staff (1) a clearer sense of their own motivations for change and the problems to be addressed and (2) a focused assessment of the program environment's readiness to support the desired change. Figure 2 highlights examples of both steps in the Learn phase at two large, urban human services organizations.

3. Translating insights into innovation

Having gathered a considerable amount of new information, the final step of the Learn phase involves program leaders and staff making decisions about the focus and starting point of change. A better sense of the motivation for change, the problem to be solved, and the program environment place some workable parameters around the scope and vision for change. Program staff should be able to answer these two questions:

- ☑ What problem are we trying to solve?
- ☑ What will success look like?

Although potential changes may be complex and multifaceted and can take time to design and implement, a helpful starting point is the "adjacent possible"—change that is just beyond the status quo (business as usual).[3] By starting with an innovation that is a stretch, yet feasible within the constraints of the current environment, the chances of scaling up a successful change are likely to be higher.

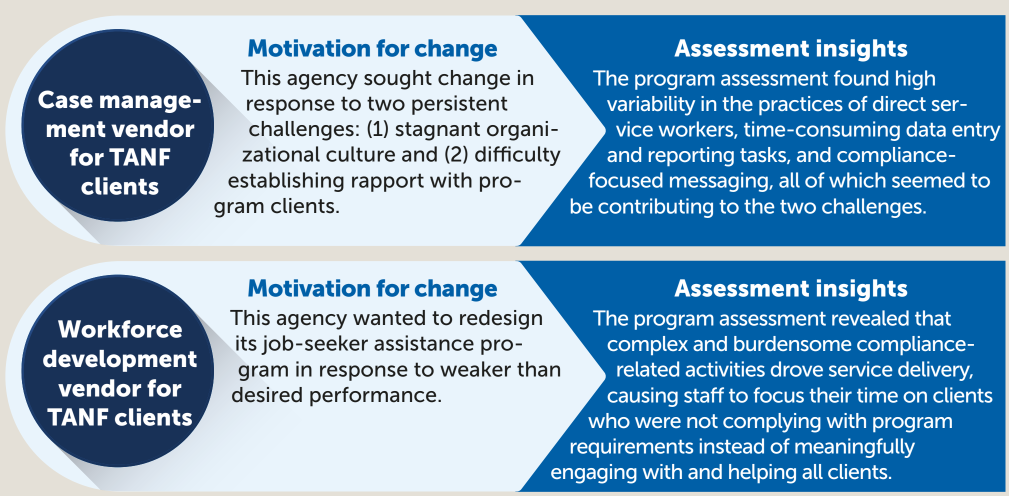

Figure 2. Examples of insights generated by the Learn phase

[1] Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Naoom, S., & Duda, M. (2013). Implementation drivers: Assessing best practices. *Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.

[2] Richburg-Hayes, Lashawn, Caitlin Anzelone, Nadine Dechausay, Saugato Datta, Alexandra Fiorillo, Louis Potok, Matthew Darling, John Balz (2014). *Behavioral Economics and Social Policy: Designing Innovative Solutions for Programs Supported by the Administration for Children and Families*. OPRE Report No. 2014-16a. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[3] Johnson, S. (2011). Where good ideas come from: *The natural history of innovation* (1st Riverhead trade pbk. ed.). New York: Riverhead Books.

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