

# Unlocking the Power of Implementation Science: Putting Principles into Practice Across Multiple Agencies

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**THIS ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS** how Minnesota's criminal justice system, through a multi-agency community of practitioners, transformed their approach to work. Before this community formed, Minnesota faced the same challenge as many agencies nationwide—a gap between policy objectives and actual outcomes. Organizational change, whether through adapting existing practices or pioneering new approaches, requires a fundamental shift in how individuals perceive problems and their roles in solving them. The transformation in Minnesota demonstrates the power of implementing the principles of implementation science.

For over two decades, the criminal justice system in the United States has been striving to integrate evidence-based and

research-informed practices. Despite this commitment, the overall impact on outcomes remains modest. Significant strides have been made in developing interventions to reduce recidivism and alter behavior, but there remains a crucial need for focused attention on implementation. This strategy often demands significant investments of time, effort, and resources beyond financial allocations and staffing increases.

Research indicates that knowing effective strategies alone is insufficient to drive substantial change. Even with new interventions, achieving positive, sustainable outcomes that can be consistently replicated has been elusive. Consequently, justice and human service agencies are under pressure to adopt research-driven approaches that quickly and effectively

demonstrate better results.

Data shows high failure rates of traditional change initiatives. Without tailored implementation support, only 14 percent of efforts successfully transition into everyday practice, often taking up to 17 years to achieve fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2009; Balas & Boren, 2000; Green & Seifert, 2005). Failed implementation can lead to leadership burnout, disillusioned staff, and public frustration.

However, there is a more effective approach grounded in the science of implementation. This discipline bridges the gap between intentions and practical implementation, requiring formal tools and structured interventions to drive impactful changes within organizations, leadership structures, and individual practices.

The Five Dynamics of Effective Implementation model developed by ACJI distills the essence of implementation science into five key dynamics: people, data, culture, leadership, and feedback. These dynamics guide purposeful and intentional actions to achieve full implementation, defined as 50 percent of practitioners delivering new policies, practices, and programs with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2019). When applied effectively, these dynamics align desired outcomes with real-world implementation.

This article showcases Minnesota's experience, illustrating how organizations can pursue sustainable, incremental change within human-serving systems across diverse delivery frameworks. It is a testament to creativity, innovation, and the transformative power of implementation leadership and science in driving meaningful progress.

### New Initiative, Same Old Story

In the early 2000s, Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) for corrections gained momentum in Minnesota, guided by the Eight Guiding Principles for Effective Interventions (Bogue et al., 2004). Agencies focused first on assessing clients' risk of reoffending to assign appropriate supervision levels. This soon led to questions about how to work effectively with those clients.

Minnesota's corrections system is unique, with three different delivery systems overseeing community supervision. This can mean a person on probation or parole may be supervised by a community, county, or state agency, or even multiple agencies simultaneously. The lack of collaboration between these agencies makes it difficult to work together on statewide initiatives like risk assessment tools or case planning.

Despite these divides, administrators and EBP trainers sought statewide collaboration. Numerous committees and advisory boards were formed to find successful implementation strategies for statewide EBP initiatives. One such group included passionate EBP trainers from all three delivery systems, with backgrounds in Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), risk and need assessment (Andrews & Bonta, 2016), effective case management, and various cognitive skills curricula.

Feeling confident in "who" to implement with and "what" to implement, the group expanded their collaborative efforts. Despite their best efforts, the plan was riddled with mistakes, missteps, and outright failures.

Their first step was creating a training program. Starting in the 2010s, they spent countless hours crafting Minnesota's case planning training. By 2012, they trained the first case planning trainers, focusing on teaching managers and supervisors across the state. The effort aimed to garner support for case planning and create buy-in around the curriculum. Trainers allowed agencies to request line staff training as needed, putting the responsibility for implementation in the hands of administrators.

Several agencies eagerly adopted the training, while others held out. Early advisory committees recommended agencies get trained and provided technological support for tracking case plans. However, this technical solution failed to yield impactful results. Agencies then trained more trainers to provide in-house training and support. When this approach faltered, policies were created to compel staff to start case planning.

Some agencies joined to comply with policy, but issues with the tracking system persisted. More time, money, and energy were spent altering technological systems, yet impactful results remained elusive. Agencies explored different case planning formats, but these technical solutions had little impact. The cycle continued, highlighting a key issue: "how" to implement effectively.

Minnesota's approach to case planning implementation followed a familiar path of repeated mistakes, not understanding that implementation science differs from correctional supervision science. Common implementation mistakes included:

- Train and Pray: Training trainers and staff repeatedly, hoping they would apply the information in practice.
- Policy Driven: Creating policies to enforce tools and skills without considering organizational culture or policy impact.
- Time Bound: Imposing arbitrary timelines that stifled implementation.
- Technical Solutions for Adaptive Problems: Focusing on technical measures to address mindset, attitude, and belief issues without defining the real barriers.
- Overlooked Organizational Culture: Ignoring the culture of organizations asked to implement changes and their openness to new measures.
- Overcorrected: Pushing hard to correct mistakes without long-term effectiveness.
- Hyperfocus on Funding and Staffing: Believing more money and positions would solve issues despite contrary evidence.

These failures led Minnesota EBP trainers and administrators to pursue further training to promote implementation with integrity and prevent future failures.

### Creating a Common Language and Lens

The groundbreaking initiative began with a small group of leaders in Ramsey County who attended ACJI's Implementation Leadership Academy (ILA). Recognizing the need to bridge the gap between training and practical application, these professionals began meeting regularly to practice principles, apply tools, and maintain their knowledge. They understood that effective implementation was a science, not a checklist.

Staff trained in Ramsey County, despite different areas of expertise, found that implementation science provided a common language and approach focused on the five dynamics of effective implementation. This shared understanding facilitated communication and collaboration.

As the impact of implementation science grew in Ramsey County, they extended their reach to neighboring counties, sharing experiences and insights. This expansion led to the formation of the ACJI ILA Multi-Agency Community (hereafter Community), a space for professionals from various counties who completed the ILA to share projects, troubleshoot challenges, and apply learned principles. The emphasis on collaboration, connection, and creating a shared language has been vital.

The Community has become a resource for professionals seeking insights and perspectives on similar issues in different settings. Meetings offer opportunities to discuss challenges, exchange ideas, and navigate the complexities of implementing change in organizations.

### The Power of a Multi-Agency Community

Connecting work across systems in Ramsey County and throughout Minnesota was crucial to success. This collaborative approach has proven invaluable as participants intertwine processes to achieve common goals. Embracing the normalcy of challenges in the change process fosters a sense of unity and growth. Champions for the work no longer felt isolated and fueled collective development.

The Community embraces being comfortable with discomfort. They navigate the difficulties of change, understanding that these moments signify true transformation.

Failures became teachable moments, connecting members and creating a collective understanding of the challenges of organizational change. The Community has come to embrace that implementation is a process, not a one-time task.

Implementation leadership involves leading both minds and hearts, engaging in the work together, and discovering individual “whys.” Aligning towards common goals, fostering diverse perspectives, and cultivating change within a cohesive team have proven impactful. Celebrating small successes along the journey strengthens relationships and sustains momentum, even when immediate changes are not visible.

Reflecting on their collaboration, they observed that adaptive changes often take a back seat to technical changes. While policies and procedures are crucial, implementation science principles encourage purposeful engagement. By focusing on adaptive changes and understanding the “why” behind their work, meaningful discussions and impactful results are achieved.

### The Power of Shared Learning

One of the first examples of the power of the community to support an implementation effort was within the Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC). The agency was in the middle of a “Dosage Probation” pilot (Carter & Sankovitz, 2014). The pilot represented a systematic change in the way the MN DOC measured success with clients, from that of a static probation term to a system in which they are discharged when the client is prepared for long-term success. The dosage that clients receive is based on time they spend working through cognitive-behavioral interventions with community providers and their agents. Once clients complete their “dosage” hours, discharge is an available option.

To provide dosage hours, probation agents need to change the way they do their daily work. They must change from being brokers of services to being change agents using cognitive behavioral interventions to build skills around their clients’ criminogenic needs. At the time, agents had great engagement and motivational skills, but were not commonly guiding clients to focus on criminogenic need or using cognitive behavioral interventions.

To prepare staff for this new approach, much work was needed. The focus of initial planning for the dosage pilot was on coaching the agents to change the way they interacted with clients. Because no coaching

was available before this, a committee was formed, a coaching model was created, and a separate coaching model pilot commenced. Several committee members volunteered to practice the coaching model with staff, half of whom were compelled to participate as a prerequisite to their dosage pilot work.

The implementation plan seemed to be a good one. Before it started, each coach discussed the coaching model pilot with prospective agents to be coached. The coaches developed metrics to indicate progress and surveys to embed feedback loops. Coaches worked individually with staff reviewing and coaching around their contacts with clients. Further, there were periodic Communities of Practice (CoPs) for the coaches to build skills, and the agents were encouraged to do the same. The coaching model pilot even hosted an event intended to create energy around the process.

After the pilot was officially launched, participation was slow. While the coaches knew that there would be an initial fear of providing audio recordings of themselves with clients, the hesitation to participate persisted longer than expected. It soon became apparent that, although the coaching model itself might have been well thought-out and based on science, the pilot participants did not share the coaches’ vision. Some did not understand that their job was changing and why. Many were not ready for the challenge of being out front as leaders in the MN DOC based on their participation in such an intense pilot.

With this, some coaches began second guessing implementation decisions. Questions came up about the pilot’s timing and about the skills and abilities of the coaches and agents. As is natural in the process of implementation, there was a temptation to overcorrect or fall back into familiar approaches, even when they knew those approaches had lacked sustainability in the past. The coaches then scheduled a focus group event with the pilot participants, but they were unsure how to proceed.

The coaches decided to share the challenges with the newly formed Community and discuss plans for the subsequent focus group with the pilot participants. The ACJI ILA group asked thoughtful questions and gave feedback that clearly supported the idea that the key issue was not about timing, skills, or the coaching model itself. The issue was that the coaches had overlooked the necessity to listen and provide support, fostering a creative, brave, less risk-averse culture. While the initial outline for the focus group was

designed to build enthusiasm, the ACJI ILA group helped the coaches shift the focus of the event toward engagement, listening, and modeling vulnerability.

The result was that the focus group was split into three segments designed to allow coaches to model vulnerability and then foster honest discussion. It felt very uncomfortable at first for everyone involved. However, it quickly became apparent that the agents wanted to speak and be heard. This forum allowed them to voice their feelings of vulnerability in being ahead of the curve and being asked to lead. In the past, coaches had been searching and digging to get participants to engage. With a few changes to the approach, agents were speaking freely, and everyone was able to have an open dialogue.

Since that time, participation in the pilot has steadily increased and is slowly scaling up in size of coaches and participants. Since that first focus group, there have been two additional focus groups. The standard approach to designing these focus groups has become that of skill building, vulnerability, listening, working side by side, and always moving the needle on culture.

### The Special Sauce of Multi-Agency Collaboration

In the realm of group dynamics, success is often rooted in the cultivation of an environment that fosters collaboration, innovation, and mutual support. The Community, having flourished amidst various challenges, attributes its success to a set of core components that form the bedrock of collective achievements.

Central to the Community’s success is the establishment of a safe space—a zone where members feel secure to express ideas, voice concerns, and share perspectives without fear of judgment. This trust-filled environment has nurtured a culture of open communication, enabling us to explore innovative solutions and address challenges collaboratively. For instance, during brainstorming sessions when a new project is shared, team members are invited to share all ideas. This environment fosters creativity and ensures that even seemingly unconventional suggestions are considered without judgment.

Having a common language and lens for understanding and exploring implementation challenges was critical to the success of the Community. Acknowledging the inherent challenges in implementation is a cornerstone of success. By collectively recognizing the

hurdles and pitfalls that often accompany projects, they are better equipped to navigate these complexities. This shared understanding facilitates a proactive approach to problem-solving and mitigates potential roadblocks.

It was also important for every member to have an equal opportunity to contribute and lead. Encouraging active participation from all ensures a holistic approach to decision-making and problem-solving. By valuing and using everyone's strengths, they harness the full potential of their collective capabilities. This group started a schedule that hands the baton from one agency to another to facilitate the meetings. This has helped everyone to learn and grow through diverse projects, ideas, and lessons of agencies across Minnesota.

Beyond the surface, members also developed a nuanced understanding of each other as individuals and system stakeholders. This deeper connection enables them to anticipate needs, support one another effectively, and act cohesively. Seeing beyond the obvious allows them to tap into the strengths and unique qualities that each member brings to the Community. They get to see each other past their roles and see the project need instead.

The simple yet profound act of feeling heard is a fundamental aspect of the group. They prioritize active listening, valuing each contribution and ensuring that every member feels acknowledged and respected. This inclusive approach empowers individuals to share their perspectives confidently, contributing to a culture of mutual respect.

## Continued Breakthroughs and Roadblocks

The implementation of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in Minnesota's community supervision presents both challenges and opportunities for growth. One key hurdle is fostering multi-agency collaboration, as differing practices across community, county, and state agencies create barriers to consistent statewide adoption. Organizational culture also plays a critical role, with invisible cultural barriers and resistance to change often slowing progress. While technical solutions, such as policy enforcement and tracking systems, are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Addressing adaptive challenges like shifting mindsets and securing staff buy-in is equally vital, particularly in initiatives such as the dosage probation pilot, where staff engagement has been slow.

Promising strategies for overcoming these obstacles include expanding continuous

communication, shared learning, and fostering a culture of trust and openness, as demonstrated in pilot coaching models. Balancing technical and adaptive solutions, supported by leadership training, coaching, and feedback loops, can help reshape organizational culture and sustain engagement. Celebrating incremental progress will also be key in maintaining momentum and morale as broader goals are pursued.

However, certain realities must be accepted. Change takes time—research shows that full fidelity in new practices can take years to achieve. Uneven adoption across agencies and the inevitability of leadership and staff turnover are additional challenges that will persist. Nonetheless, with a sustained focus on communication, collaboration, and cultural adaptation, Minnesota can continue advancing toward its goals of effective, evidence-based community supervision.

## Conclusion

In our pursuit of big goals, we often overlook the small victories along the way. Even when things don't go as planned, there is still progress, and we can learn from it. Minnesota's experience shows us how to make the most of what we have instead of always seeking something new. It also teaches us how to break down barriers within organizations and across system stakeholders that naturally arise when we're trying to make changes from within. The Implementation Leadership Academy and our Multi-Agency Community have demonstrated that leaders and champions don't have to face success or failure alone. Sustainable change requires collaboration and drawing on people's experiences, guided by implementation science.

Organizational culture plays a significant role in implementation efforts and affects the decisions organizations make to align people, processes, and policies with their implementation strategy. Often, this culture is invisible to those within the organization but can profoundly impact progress. By involving people from outside the original organization, Minnesota leaders identified and overcame cultural barriers hindering progress. This allowed for reflection, constructive criticism, and feedback in a non-threatening way, opening new possibilities for everyone involved.

Even with a dedicated team supporting change, it is still challenging. Humans are not naturally great at change, even when it is essential for our health and well-being. The Minnesota Community provided a space for

leaders and champions to be vulnerable, have fun, and be challenged by their work in meaningful ways. It required participants to set aside their titles and positions, creating a supportive community of peers who understand the difficulties of this work.

Understanding implementation science and how to lead change in organizations is crucial for leaders aiming to bring about lasting change. Sustainable implementation takes time and effort. It is about more than just following plans; it is about fostering a culture of adaptability, resilience, and innovation. With dedication and a strategic approach informed by implementation science, leaders can guide their organizations toward meaningful and lasting change.

The Minnesota Community has reshaped the narrative of Community Corrections in the state by applying the principles of implementation science and leadership. Starting from a small initiative in Ramsey County, it has grown into a statewide movement, showing that transformative change is not only possible but enriching. The emphasis on collaboration, learning, and celebrating successes together represents a new era in community-driven impact. As professionals continue to gather, share, and evolve, the legacy of the Minnesota Community will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact on the landscape of Community Corrections in the state. This article serves as a guide and inspiration for other agencies striving to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ultimately achieving better outcomes for communities and individuals alike.

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