COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION MODELS TO PROMOTE ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT AND SERVICE EFFECTIVENESS

Bowen McBeath, Ph.D., MSW

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A quote for focusing

"My leadership team and I have noticed that there is a subset of line staff who come to work wondering if there is a better way to serve children and families, and who are using academic research and whatever data we have available at our agency to try to figure out how we can improve services. How can I support these workers and grow their numbers?"

- Human Service Agency (NGO) Director

Three models of promoting organizational improvement and service effectiveness

Evidence-informed practitioner model. Agency staff seek to integrate the best available research, agency data, and other sources of information to promote strategic decision-making.

Link officer model. A designated agency practitioner (usually a middle manager) links the agency to an intermediary organization that provides research support services.

Performance management model. Agency leaders support the creation of a performance-oriented organizational culture through the development and systematic use of internal performance measurement systems.

Outline of my talk

For each of these models, I will:

1. Provide a brief introduction to the model.
2. Summarize new research that concerns the model.
   a. Study 1: Survey of **evidence-informed practitioners** (San Francisco Bay Area).
   b. Study 2: Survey of **link officers** (UK and Canada).
   c. Study 3: Survey of **performance management** strategies among private child welfare agencies (across US states).
3. Provide suggestions to help agencies and practitioners wishing to use the model.

I will conclude by identifying organizationally-focused strategies to support practice research in social service agencies.

1. EVIDENCE-INFORMED PRACTITIONERS – A FRONTLINE PRACTICE RESEARCH MODEL

Evidence-informed practitioners

- *Critically engaged:* Individuals with an affinity for empirical inquiry, critical thinking, and reflection.
- *Not only using but also doing research:* Practitioners who are engaged in research within human service organizations, often to address pressing service delivery questions.
- *Focused on organizational improvement:*
  - Unwilling to rely on the status quo.
  - Delighted to actively question and experiment.
  - Able to use knowledge from a variety of sources (e.g., clients, coworkers, thought-leaders, researchers) to address researchable questions.
  - Able to critically engage in understanding how practice informs research and how research informs practice.

Roles for evidence-informed practitioners

- **Knowledge development/translation**
  - *Searching for answers to "practice puzzles"* to identify alternatives to practice situations that have significant meaning for service users and co-workers.
  - Facilitating the *search for and testing of promising practices*.
- **Organizational development/leadership**
  - Identifying practice-based research needs and *spearheading empirical practice improvement initiatives*.
  - *Serving as boundary spanners* between the organization and outside researchers and translators of scientific literature.

Study 1: Survey of evidence-informed practice (EIP) in the human services

- Online, self-administered survey conducted over June-July 2013 with employees of 11 San Francisco Bay Area (California) county human service agencies.

- Four domains of interest:

  1. Practitioner characteristics.
  2. Opportunities for learning and creativity at work.
  3. Use of research evidence at work.
  4. Professional development needs related to EIP.

The study context and respondents

Agencies

- Agency service divisions:
  - Child Welfare, Benefits/Public Assistance/Employment Services, and Adults and Aging.
- Diverse set of organizations
  - Urban, suburban, rural counties.
  - Staff size: 350 to 2,200 FTE.
  - Budget: $93 million to $738 million.

Practitioners

- Frontline (9%), supervisory (38%), managerial (27%), and executive level (25%) staff.
- Coverage across major service divisions: Child Welfare (43%); Benefits/Public Assistance/Employment (19%); Adults and Aging (7%); Administrative/Analyst (31%)
- 517 of 958 (52%) employees responded.

What processes are involved in EIP?

Analyzing

Exploring

Cognitive Processes

Asking

Knowing

Researching

Informing

Engaging

Interactive Processes

Supervising

Discussing

Improving

Creating

Action Processes

Adapting

Implementing

Tracking

Compliance Processes

Complying

Evaluating

How can we support EIP?

- Administrators are critical for supporting EIP.

- Administrators can help by:
  - *Bridging* external and internal sources of evidence to build knowledge-sharing systems.
  - *Promoting* innovation in daily practice.
  - *Facilitating* access to needed practice research resources.
  - *Modeling* and *championing* engagement in EIP (i.e., not just "leading by facilitating" EIP but "leading by doing" EIP).

- This suggests greater attention to the socialization and training of new and continuing managers in EIP.

2. LINK OFFICERS – AN INTERORGANIZATIONAL ALLIANCE BUILDING MODEL

Link officers are boundary spanners

- Link officers may span two types of boundaries to carry out their role responsibilities.

1. **Interorganizational boundaries**: linking staff to external resources and research support agencies.

2. **Internal boundaries**: connecting the world of practice and the world of research in the agency.

UK and Canadian research support organizations

research
in practice

Using Evidence to Promote Excellence in Child Welfare

Research in Practice (RiP) is a UK nonprofit membership-based organization that works to bring together research and practitioner expertise - building the child and adult service sector's capacity for evidence-informed practice.

Practitioners and Researchers Together (PART) is a Canadian nonprofit membership-based organization that works to identify, synthesize and translate relevant research into digestible, usable informational resources, primarily for use by child welfare practitioners in member organizations.

Link officer roles

- PART and RiP ask member organizations to identify one or more Link PARTners (PART) or Link Officers (RiP) in their organization.

- Link PARTners (LPs) and Link Officers (LOs), in addition to their existing role in the child or adult welfare organization, are tasked with promoting and connecting the member organization staff with PART or RiP resources.

- In essence, the LP/LO becomes the conduit and bridge for research and evidence-informed practice resources between the research support organization and the host agency.

Study 2: Survey of link officers

- Online, self-administered survey conducted over September 2013-January 2014.

- Three domains of interest:

  1. Characteristics of individuals serving in a LP/LO role.
  2. Major activities involved in the LP/LO role?
  3. Organizational support needs of LPs/LOs.

- 137 of 291 (47%) current and former LPs and LOs completed the survey.

Who are link officers?

Link Officers (UK)

- Staff development roles (58.3%) or QA (13.3%)
- Supervise 2 to 3 employees
- In social services approximately 14 years
- In their organization an average of 11 years,
- In their current role for about 4 to 5 years.
- Bachelor's degrees: 52.5% (14 BSW)
- Master's degrees: 39% (9 MSW)
- A levels (secondary diploma): 8.5%

Link PARTners (Canada)

- Supervisory roles (49%) or QA (21%)
- Supervise 4 to 5 employees
- In social services approximately 19 years
- In their organization an average of 12 years
- In their current role for about 5 to 6 years
- Bachelor's degrees: 22% (9 BSWs)
- Master's degrees: 65% (31 MSWs)
- Doctoral degrees: 4%

Major LP/LO activities

- **Locating and sharing research resources.**
  - Promoting and facilitating access to PART/RiP resources and external research materials for agency staff.
  - Sharing/disseminating research resources with others in their organization.

- **Facilitating staff engagement in EIP.**
  - Networking with staff to support their EIP efforts through case consultation, individual support, mentoring, or coaching.
  - Serving as a liaison or advocate for PART/RiP by promoting and coordinating staff participation in PART/RiP trainings and events.

How can we support link officers?

- Provide needed time and training resources.
- Provide access to formal channels of dissemination.
- Support their influence and usefulness among their peers.
- Strengthen their technical capabilities relevant to EIP.
- Ensure that their major agency duties and the LP/LO function are complementary.

3. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT – AN ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS MODEL

Performance management (PM)

- Performance management systems reflect the following phrase: **"Measure what matters most!"**
- With PM systems, we **systematize** our approach to tracking performance of our programs and organizations. We do this by:
  1. Reflecting on our logic model and theory of change.
  2. Identifying key processes (i.e., essential resources, activities/throughputs, outputs, and proximal outcomes).
  3. For these key processes, developing key performance indicators (KPIs).
  4. Gathering data on KPIs systematically and regularly.
  5. Analyzing these data and summarizing findings via performance dashboards.
  6. Using dashboards to support data-driven decision making.

PM is like driving while looking at the dashboard or through the rear-view mirror

8 reasons for PM (Hatry, 2003)

- To evaluate.
- To control.
- To budget
- To motivate.
- To promote.
- To celebrate.
- To learn.
- To improve.

Multidimensional performance dashboards

Study 3: National Survey of Private Child and Family Serving Agencies

- In many U.S. states, most child welfare services are delivered by private agencies (NGOs).

- This is the first national survey of these agencies.
- May-July 2011, anonymous online survey, administered to agency directors.
- The 446 responding agencies were located in over 40 states.

- The survey contained 330 survey questions over seven topical domains, including agency and managerial demographics, finances, service delivery, cooperation and competition, external pressures, and **PM**.

How do agency directors promote staff engagement in PM?

Strategy	%
Discuss in staff meetings	100
Supervisor-led discussions with frontline staff	82
Formal communication by agency leadership	75
Formal training	72
Written policies	66
Review/discussion by board of directors	32

- The bolded items were the most associated with the level of staff engagement in PM.

How can we support PM?

Best practices

- Present clear arguments for why PM is important to all.
- Pay attention to staff attitudes and beliefs, and minimize the burden of PM.
- Involve key groups in decision-making.
- Be prepared to invest in PM resources and training.
- Expect that you will get "stuck" at times in your quest for performance improvement. Foster a climate of open dialogue to learn from "mistakes".
- PM results should support coaching and supervision to help programs develop improvement plans.

Kotter's (1996) 8 steps for transformation

1. Create a sense of urgency.
2. Build a guiding coalition.
3. Form strategic vision and initiatives.
4. Enlist volunteer army.
5. Enable action by removing barriers.
6. Generate short-term wins.
7. Sustain acceleration.
8. Institute change.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTS

Dimensions of organizational support

The three studies highlight the importance of organizational support.

In order to support practice research in our agencies, it is important to focus on each of the following dimensions of organizational support.

Institutional	Organizational culture & climate
Leadership & management	Workforce development

Social support

Institutional support

Challenges	Support strategies
Research is viewed as top-down and irrelevant for practice.	Reframe research around its value for social advocacy & organizational development.
No requirements or incentives for testing and innovation.	Incentivize model development and testing.
Few opportunities for testing novel practice approaches.	Interorganizational network development to promote research infrastructure and knowledge sharing.

Organizational culture and climate support

Challenges	Support strategies
Lack of learning organizational perspective emphasizing experimentation and critical thinking.

Defensive, risk-averse culture. | *Formal*: R&D units; chief innovation officers; require clinical data mining; practice research competitions.

Informal: strengthen research networks anchored by link officers; institutionalize critical analysis of success and failure. |

Leadership and management support

Challenges	Support strategies
Managers do not champion practice research or create space for it.	Managers model evidence-informed practice by doing and facilitating practice research.
Unclear organizational and professional boundaries regarding service delivery, service user assessment, and data reporting.	Establishment of feedback loops to integrate program improvement efforts within an organizational development framework.

Workforce development support

Challenges	Support strategies
Practitioner research anxiety. Insufficient time, training, and/or interest in research. Lack of access to relevant, engaging research training and professional development.	Recruit staff with high innovation potential and robust research training (e.g., research requirements added to job descriptions). Staff trained to be bicultural practitioner-researchers. Sabbaticals and job rotations used to foster reflection and cross-pollination.

Social support

Challenges	Support strategies
Lack of supportive networks and dedicated spaces to engage in critical reflection on key organizational practices.	Provide resources to develop and sustain learning communities, and organize service improvement efforts through them.

Returning to our initial quote

"*My leadership team and I have noticed that there is a subset of line staff who come to work wondering if there is a better way to serve children and families, and who are using academic research and whatever data we have available at our agency to try to figure out how we can improve services. How can I support these workers and grow their numbers?*"

Institutional

Organizational culture & climate

Leadership & management

Workforce development

Social support

Summary of major points

THANK YOU!