

LETTING OUTCOMES DRIVE DECISIONS: SELECTING NEW TOOLS TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Criminal justice agencies are more challenged than ever before to develop their organizational competency to learn and use evidence-based practices in order to improve correctional outcomes. Because of the centrality of case management to criminal justice practice, agencies are increasingly seeking a technical solution to support a more evidence-based approach to case management.

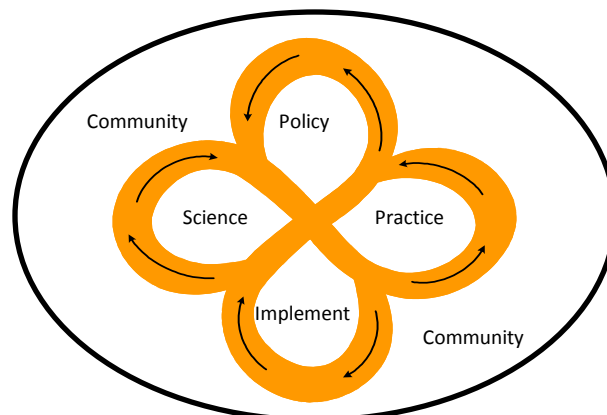
One of the more formidable challenges of adopting evidence-based practices is changing the existing systems to appropriately support new improvements. A shift in thinking must occur whereby outcomes drive practice, rather than the other way around. Agencies increase their likelihood of success if they first establish an evidence-based mindset and develop an agency blueprint to guide change initiatives of all kinds.

ESTABLISHING AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Learning is at the core of all discussions about evidence-based practice in public-sector systems. These discussions generally involve a learning process where policy, implementation, practice, and science domains are integrated to ensure that the most effective approaches are identified, supported by policy and implemented with fidelity to achieve the outcomes of an initiative.

The diagram below offers a method of conceptualizing the evidence-based learning process. Knowledge is developed and used as a part of a continuous relationship between science and practice. For example, justice professionals identify practices used to produce success in their role, often on the basis of experience. These practices may be shown to have evidence of effectiveness as a result of anecdotal stories, tradition of use, or other methods. These practices are formulated into research questions and subjected to scientific testing. In this respect, practice feeds science with questions to be tested, and the results are fed back to practice for consideration and, when appropriate, implementation.

Figure 1: Learning Process for Evidence-Based Practice



Similarly, a number of individuals and agencies are assembling the results of scientific research and are sharing these findings with practitioners. Justice professionals are using these evidence-based strategies to refine or replace current practices. The cycle produces an “evidence-base” with an emphasis on identifying master quality practice and science, then using each to improve the outcomes in systems.

The learning cycle also incorporates policy formulation and management. Legislative and agency policy guides agency practice. Adopting policies ensures that evidence-based practice strategies are regarded as priorities in the intra and inter-system designs. The learning process running through policy, practice and science spawns innovation and improvement strategies. These strategies are implemented, creating new knowledge.

Finally, the whole process happens within the context of communities – and this is perhaps most important when considering offender re-entry. The community includes formal and informal institutions that shape the environmental conditions affecting behavior. These institutions provide leverage points for improving conditions in the lives of individuals and families. The framework above helps to ensure that the voices of participants from various domains are heard, valued, and integrated into the design of solutions.

DEVELOPING SYSTEM-PLANNING TOOLS

Because of the centrality of case management to criminal justice practice, agencies are increasingly seeking a technical solution to support a more evidence-based approach to case management. We recommend the use of three system-planning tools before embarking on any major system change:

A major deliverable is a detailed articulation of the approach to case management clarifying what will be done, who will do it, and how it will impact outcomes to ensure the technical case management solution supports the work of the initiative.

1. Specification of a blueprint to align the outcomes targeted by the agency and the capacity of the case management and assessment solutions
2. Definition of the case flow process
3. Specification of the case management logic

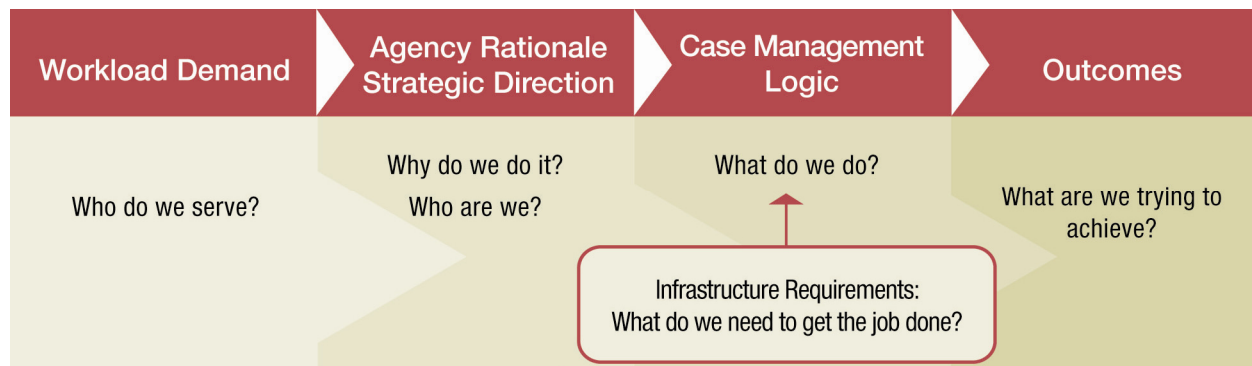
A major deliverable is a detailed articulation of the approach to case management clarifying *what* will be done, who will do it, and *how* it will impact outcomes to ensure the technical case management solution supports the work of the initiative. In particular, these planning tools will:

- Specify the initiative’s logic linking targeted outcomes with the mechanisms that will be used to achieve these outcomes
- Articulate the rationale that underlies how and why the services deployed by the agency will achieve the desired outcomes
- Individualize understanding of the person in the social environments targeted by the initiative – e.g., institutions, families, and communities
- Define the network of service providers including their roles and responsibilities in ensuring the case management process is executed and that individual-level performance is documented
- Specify the infrastructure requirements needed to support the design of the agency.
- Align practice, particularly evidence-based practice, to increase the value of the case management solution

The blueprint will help practitioners focus on the effectiveness of their case management approach and monitor their approach for fidelity and impact using performance indicators that reinforce evidence-based strategies. In essence, institutionally-based systems must implement approaches with sufficient design integrity to be tested for effectiveness as the initiative matures.

PLANNING STEP 1: DEVELOPING A BLUEPRINT

Any effort to adopt a more evidence-based approach should follow the primary rule of evidence-based practice, which is to focus on outcomes first, before processes. With that principle in mind, the system-planning blueprint below provides a framework for defining the intention of the system and works from desired outcomes backward to processes and resources needed to achieve those outcomes. The blueprint includes four components. Based on the principle of putting outcomes first, let's begin there. The outcomes component captures the definitions of what the initiative is trying to achieve.



Another component of the blueprint, Case Management Logic, incorporates several other dimensions and will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

The third blueprint component is the rationale for the case management system. Rationale may be a variety of components, including vision, mission, principles, and theories. The rationale answers the question, “Why do agency leaders and practitioners expect the efforts in the case management design to produce better outcomes?” The answer to this question should tie back to the evidence-based knowledge that underlies the assessment technology and that guides effective practices. This alignment helps to coordinate efforts on the initiative, provides guidance to practitioners on the purpose of their work, and creates a systemic response capable of being evaluated for effectiveness.

The next component – Workload Demand – is an understanding of the workload drivers – e.g., social, technical, economic, and political trends – affecting the demand for service in the system. Workload demands are measured at these macro levels and at the level of the system, agency and individual. Case management and assessment technical solutions are used to inform individual level indicators within the context of their family, school and community. Effective assessment technologies will ensure that the variety of information needed to evaluate according to the agency rationale, practices and outcomes are available. As such, these assessment designs need to be nimble enough to produce reliable and valid measures of particular risks and needs across a variety of decisions.

Developing a blueprint helps create a common architecture for understanding and improving systems processes. It also affords the opportunity for agencies to explore a variety of evidence-based improvements and build an infrastructure to monitor results.

Finally, a broad range of infrastructure is involved with justice and human service systems – and this infrastructure also must be considered. It includes a range of capacities, including technology, funding, policy formation, staffing and training, buildings, equipment, communication and coordination mechanisms, and management activities. Clearly inventorying needed infrastructures is especially important because infrastructure for supporting effective services are usually extensive, undervalued by the public, difficult to maintain, constantly changing, and routinely cut across numerous agency boundaries in the human services and justice system.

Developing a blueprint helps create a common architecture for understanding and improving system processes. In this work, the alignment opportunities are specifically targeted to optimize the flow of work and information and to facilitate the most efficient and appropriate use of resources. This process also affords the opportunity for agencies to explore a variety of evidence-based improvements and build an infrastructure to monitor results.

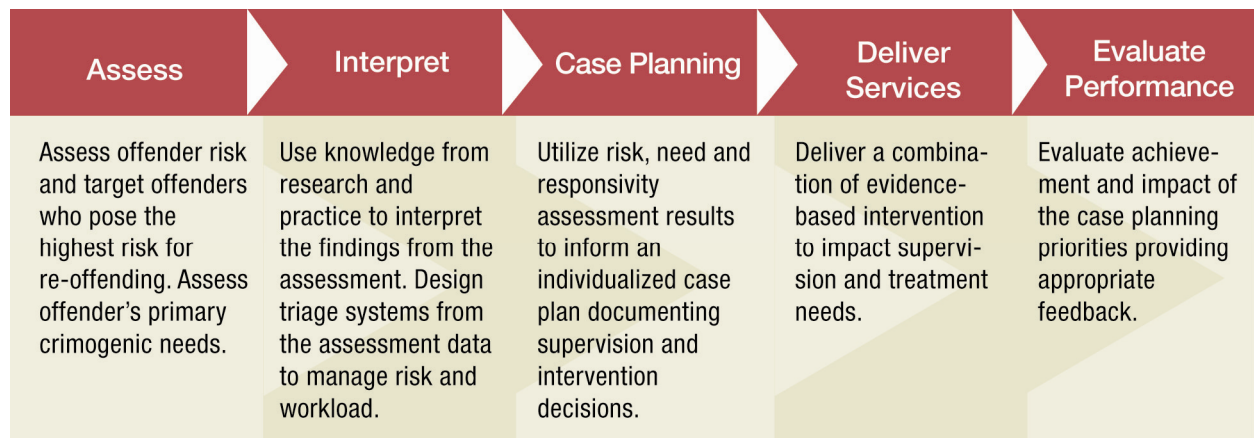
PLANNING STEP 2: UNDERSTANDING THE PRIMARY CASE FLOW PROCESS

Before changing its case management practice, an agency must understand how its work fits within the larger system and what demands those larger systems impose. The justice and human service systems are characterized by a common series of decisions. The decision points form a literal playing field upon which the efforts of a variety of partners play out to produce outcomes. As a result, the agencies that make up the system must work to specify the design and quality of the decisions within their responsibility. Moreover, these agencies are responsible for assuring the flow of information into and out of their decision processes. These efforts help assure the alignment required to demonstrate system performance – e.g., outcomes.

During the planning phase, agencies should map out those system decision points to clarify their linkages and alignment with other functions.

PLANNING STEP 3: DEFINING THE CASE MANAGEMENT LOGIC MODEL

Once the systemic case-flow process is specified, an agency should explore internally its case management practice and develop a case management logic model. This model provides a critical framework for linking casework with performance and establishing the effectiveness of the approach. The case management logic includes assessment, interpretation, case planning, programming and evaluation. It has been Northpointe's experience that specifying these fundamental stages of case management helps to standardize and communicate the approach while providing an objective reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Below is an overview of the case management logic model.



CONCLUSION

Once an agency has developed an evidence-based mindset and related planning tools, it can make effective decisions about how to change its practices or select new technical solutions to achieve desired outcomes. This initial analysis is critical to focusing efforts and making the best decisions about the tools needed to accomplish the objectives. The agencies who take the time to complete this fundamental work are rewarded by better outcomes, increased morale and better use of resources.