PracticeBRIEF

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The Innovate Phase: Co-creating Evidence-informed Solutions to Improve Human Services Programs

The Learn, Innovate, Improve (or LI²) process is an approach that practitioners might use as part of the change and continuous quality improvement process. LI² was developed by Mathematica Policy Research in partnership with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families and Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. LI² is distinct from other change management strategies in its explicit emphasis on: (1) close collaboration between researchers and practitioners for sustainable change, (2) embedding evidence and analytic approaches at every stage, (3) capacity building of state and local human services agencies to self-administer the improvement process, and (4) knowledge building for the program and the field. This practice brief focuses on the second phase of the process—Innovate—which is intended to help both researchers of human services programs and the professionals who administer programs to generate new and innovative ideas to address pressing challenges.

WHY LI²? THE MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

The LI² 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. LI² repurposes and reframes existing, reliable research methods into an

understandable and replicable series of steps. LI² 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, LI² 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

LI² is a three-phase process, beginning with clarifying the program's motivation for change and considering how the program environ-

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ment might receive the proposed change. This Learn phase directly informs the subsequent Innovate phase, which focuses on identifying, prioritizing, and designing a solution that is informed by research evidence, behavioral and social science, and practical experience. This brief outlines the primary steps and activities involved in the Innovate phase. The third phase, Improve, involves a series of small-scale pilot tests—known as *road tests*—designed to gather feedback and refine strategies. As the new strategies are scaled up, more rigorous evaluation methods can be used to further improve or assess the impact of these strategies. Figure 1 shows the LI² process as a cycle, in which iterative testing of improvement activities contributes to continuous learning—identifying what is working well and what is not—to create and refine evidence-informed strategies.

STEPS OF THE INNOVATE PHASE

The Innovate phase brings stakeholders together to define and plan a specific change, building on the understanding of the program environment generated during the Learn phase. Innovate includes three steps: (1) planning and prioritizing; (2) generating ideas; and (3) defining a potential solution to iteratively test during the Improve phase. The Innovate phase culminates in a *road map for change*, which serves as the guide for implementation and road testing of the innovation. The road map serves the same purposes as a traditional logic model, but the process for its development differs in that it is grounded in the

program environment and emphasizes the role that context plays in the success of a proposed solution. It also explicitly names the "targets" of the intervention—attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, skills, or relationship changes—which link strategies to outcomes.

1. Planning and prioritizing: preparing for design

It is important to lay out a clear plan for the activities and processes to create an innovation before launching into the work of actual design. A well-crafted *design plan* includes the "why, what, when, where, who, and how" of your design process, such as a concise statement of the problem to be solved, measurable goals and objectives, specific activities and strategies you will use to generate ideas and make decisions, and the people who are involved, among other elements (see Table 1). The design plan serves as a flexible "blueprint" for the Innovate phase, giving focus to the work that lies ahead based on priority goals and objectives. Of course, the design plan may be adjusted based on evolving needs or priorities over time.

Although each of the questions in Table 1 is important, deciding who will take part in the design process is especially critical. When creating a design plan, it may be helpful to consult with a researcher who has expertise in the subject matter or program area. This is an opportunity for program leaders and researchers to craft a plan together (co-create) that takes full advantage of relevant research evidence

The LI² process

LEARN — Understand the motivation for change and assess the environment

INNOVATE — Design research-informed solutions

IMPROVE — Test and refine until goals are met

Testing leads to continuous learning and further innovation

Figure 1

Elements of the design plan

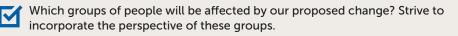| Design elements	Guiding questions
Problem statement (why)	Based on the Learn stage, what problem(s) are we trying to solve? What factors contribute to these problems? What is the impetus for change?
Goals and objectives (what)	What do we hope to achieve during the design process? What are our goals and objectives? How will we know if we have achieved them?
Timeline (when)	When and how will we design? What is our timeline for completing the process?
Location (where)	Where will we meet—in person or virtually? If in person, what location? What types of activities might be facilitated in the physical space?
People (who)	Who will be included in the design process? What role(s) will they play? What subject matter experts or other key stakeholders might inform the process? What decision-making authority do they have, if any?
Strategies (how)	What strategies or activities will we use to reach our goals or objectives? What relevant research evidence, science, or practice wisdom might inform the design process?

Table 1

and methods. In addition, program leaders should involve a diverse and representative group of people in the design process, such as staff at all levels, community-based partners, and perhaps program clients. Incorporating a variety of perspectives—specifically among underrepresented people and those with little-to-no decisionmaking power—strengthens buy-in for this collaborative process (see Box 1).

2. Generating ideas

Your design plan sets the stage for a dialogue capable of generating new ideas among members of the design team. To facilitate this kind of generative discussion, the team might engage in a series of design activities, for example by using human-centered design or other tactics that encourage exploring a variety of possible solutions to the problem at hand (see Table 2).

These design activities can spur creativity within a focused and structured setting, avoiding open-ended brainstorming that lacks priorities or preferences. Innovation takes many forms, and a wide variety of facilitation or brainstorming methods can be used in this phase. Ideally, these activities take place in person among members of the design team, though it is possible to accomplish some activities virtually (over the phone or using a webinar platform). Regardless of the methods used to explore new ideas or existing approaches, this step of the Innovate phase is intended to draw on relevant research evidence, theories, and concepts from the behavioral and social sciences.

These design activities can be useful to draw out the experiences, perspectives, and values of those who may not traditionally be part of designing

Considerations for choosing your team

☑ Which groups of people will be affected by our proposed change? Strive to incorporate the perspective of these groups.

☑ Who, specifically, is best suited to help us achieve success (as defined in the Learn phase)? These individuals may be key contributors to the work ahead.

☑ What perspective will each person bring to the design process?

☑ Which perspectives are most commonly underrepresented or undervalued? How might we strengthen their equity in the design process?

☑ Who are the potential champions of the proposed change? Who are the potential naysayers? How might each play an important role in the design process?

Box 1

program changes, including those who benefit from program services (clients) and those who provide services (frontline staff). These activities allow the design team to consider a broad range of possibilities for addressing the issue at hand and to build consensus around an innovation inclusive of various desires, needs, and values. It may also be helpful to the program and for the design team to partner with a facilitator trained in these and other design thinking processes.

Examples of design activities

Activity	Description	Example
Stakeholder mapping	A stakeholder map is a diagram that portrays the relevant persons or entities within a specific context and their relationships with one another. This activity may be used to explore who holds a stake in your program or change initiative, their expectations and perspectives, and the relationships among these stakeholders.	A county TANF program team lists all of the service providers in the community. The team draws lines of varying styles between all of the organizations represented on the board to represent the strength and nature of their relative connections to one another. Seeing all the players and the varying strength of their relationships helps the team determine where natural affinities might exist and where additional outreach may be needed.
Rose, bud, thorn	Rose, bud, thorn is an exercise used to build the team's understanding of strengths (roses), opportunities (buds), and challenges (thorns). This exercise allows the team to explore a diversity of perspectives about the strengths, opportunities, and challenges associated with any given issue, and to see how things are and are not working.	An employment services team takes stock of its program orientation. Each team member shares reflections about the strengths, challenges, and opportunities they perceive with respect to the current approach. After each person shares, the team groups reflections thematically and considers the implications for potential changes to the existing approach. This exercise helps to deepen the team's understanding of the issues they want to tackle.
Statement starters	A statement starter is a way of reframing insights (such as a named strength, opportunity, or challenge) in the form of a visionary question, prompting the team to think "big" about the possible solutions. The starter "how might we" can be paired with a statement in order to open it up for discussion and exploration of the issue.	The same employment services team mentioned above agrees that the primary challenge with the current approach to program orientation is low attendance. The team uses a statement starter to reframe the problem as a question and push the team to explore creative solutions: "***How might we*** *make our customers excited to come to orientation?*"
Creative matrix	A creative matrix is an exercise to explore ideas at the intersections of distinct categories. Using a fillable grid, a set of categories is listed along each axis. For example, one axis might display categories of people or steps in a service delivery process. The other axis might display categories of tactics or tools (technology, facilitated activities, peer-to-peer connections). The design team can populate the cells with ideas and solutions for consideration. The focus of this exercise is on generating many ideas for consideration and further exploration, rather than refining a few ideas.	Using the "how might we" question described above, the team develops a matrix to consider a variety of ideas. One axis represents different aspects of the orientation (such as outreach, in-person session, and handouts and materials); the other axis represents categories of tactics and tools that could be used (such as online technology, facilitated activities, multimedia, and peer interactions). The team suggests numerous ideas at the intersection of each pair of categories across the grid. **Simplified example of a creative matrix:** |	Outreach beforehand	In-person session	Handouts/ Materials
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Online technology			
Facilitated activities			
Multimedia			
Peer interactions				

Table 2

Activity	Description	Example
Impact-effort matrix	An impact-effort matrix is a diagram that helps the team visualize the relative priority of ideas using a two-by-two grid. Ideas are first placed in relative order along a horizontal axis based on their perceived level of impact, and along a vertical axis based on their perceived level of effort. This produces a grid of four categories: ideas of high impact-low effort ("quick wins"), low impact-low effort ("can do's"), low impact-high effort ("luxuries"), and high impact-high effort ("long-term strategies").	Drawing from the creative matrix described above, each member of the team chooses two favorite ideas from any cells of the grid. The team then plots these select ideas along the horizontal axis first, then along the vertical axis. Each idea occupies a distinct ranking on each axis. The team uses this completed matrix to interpret and prioritize ideas based on these rankings. **Simplified example of an impact-effort matrix:** *Hi* — Luxuries □ — Long-term strategies □ **Effort** — Can do's □ — Quick wins □ *Lo* — *Lo* — **Impact** — *Hi*

Note: This table provides brief descriptions of design activities. For detailed guidance on using these strategies, consult a human-centered design training resource, such as the LUMA Institute or IDEO's Design Kit. These descriptions reflect general practices in the field of design thinking, including the approaches.

The idea generation step of the Innovate phase intentionally focuses on exploring many ideas and possibilities. The design activities described above can facilitate the group in diverging from a common problem statement to consider many potential solutions and then converging again around an idea (or multiple ideas) informed by diverse perspectives and values. However, the work of the Innovate phase does not end with consensus on a particular solution. The final step—creating a road map for change—takes a high-priority idea and fleshes it out into a concrete, logical plan for implementation.

3. Defining: the road map for change

The Innovate phase is intended to produce a *road map for change*. The road map is a tool for expanding an idea into an actionable plan, prompting the team to describe a proposed strategy and articulate the relationships between it and its targets for change, the anticipated outcomes, and the influencers (factors that may help or hinder). The road map is a logic model, but offers a more focused set of categories to streamline the process (see Figure 2 for an example of a road map).

Creating a road map requires narrative alignment—that is, a compelling and logical case for how a strategy will bring about a given change in order to produce a measureable outcome. This exercise, when truly embraced, can be a challenging process of self-reflection: *Why do we believe that our change will cause this outcome?* Targets (the middle column of the road map) are the critical link between strategies and outcomes. Targets are changes *within people*, such as attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, skills, or relationships that the team intends to effect through the strategies. Outcomes are the substantively important and measurable results of the named targets for change.

A road map can also help program leaders manage change and ongoing quality improvement. First, the road map can be used to strategically break the intervention into its individual parts for iterative testing during the Improve phase. This creates an opportunity to learn how specific elements work, for whom, and under what circumstances. Looking for, identifying, and documenting any factors that help or hinder the success of a strategy is a key function of the road map. Second, the road map serves as a point of reference for what strategies should look like if implemented as intended. The road map can eventually be used to define fidelity measures for use during a formal evaluation to better understand why a strategy is effective or not. Third, program leaders can

A road map for change: Providing career navigation and wrap-around support to work experience participants

Strategies
What we will do

- Participants work part-time (subsidized) at an employer site for at least 3-month placements
- Participants receive 4 hours per month of on-site reflective supervision
- Worksite supervisors provide constructive feedback based on 1 structured observation per month
- Participants complete 1 module (30 minutes) per week of an online soft skills training course
- Participants meet with a career navigator once per month at the employment services agency to review and revise goals related to their work experience site and broader career aspirations

Targets
What we will change

- Among participants:
  o Feelings of support
  o Self-efficacy
  o Perceived personal growth in relevant abilities and skills
  o Intentions regarding a career in the relevant field of work
- Among worksite supervisors:
  o Value participants as equal contributors to the work (on par with full-time employees)
  o Prioritize investing time in reflective supervision, observations, and constructive feedback
- Relationship between participants and supervisors:
  o Trust

Outcomes
What success will look like

- 80% of participants maintain full engagement (completing the required number of hours in work-related activities) for the duration of work experience
- Month 3 observations (completed by supervisors) indicate growth in at least one hard and one soft skill relative to month 1 observation among 70% of participants
- 50% of participants receive an offer for continued employment (subsidized or unsubsidized) beyond month 3
- 70% of worksites agree to host at least one additional participant based on initial experience

Influencers
Factors outside of our control that may affect our strategies, targets, or outcomes

- Available positions and needs of worksites/employers
- Continued availability of subsidized employment funds

Figure 2

use elements of the road map for performance management, for example, by defining staff competencies (strategies) or intermediate and long-term performance measures (outcomes).

FROM INNOVATE TO IMPROVE

Once the design team has crafted a road map for change, it is time to try out the new strategy.

The Improve phase of LI² often begins with a road test, a prototyping process that can provide formative feedback on the innovation in order to refine it. In this way, the road map continues to guide improvement efforts and should be updated to reflect what the team learns during the road test.

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