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Getting Real With Strategy: Insights From Implementation Science

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Keywords: Foundation strategy, implementation science, operationalizing strategy, organizational learning, implementing innovations, practice profile, implementation drivers

Key Points

- Foundations are increasingly coming to appreciate the importance of strategy. But simply having a strategy – even an explicit strategy – does not guarantee that a foundation will actually achieve its goals.
- To implement a strategy effectively, a foundation needs to operationalize it in the form of specific functions that staff will carry out and needs to create an organizational infrastructure that supports the strategy. The field of implementation science offers a set of tools for helping foundations address these tasks.
- After introducing some general principles of implementation science, this article describes in depth the concepts of *practice profiles,* which translate programs or strategies into specific activities to be carried out by implementation staff, and *implementation drivers,* which point to organizational factors that determine whether a program or strategy is implemented well enough to achieve its intended outcomes.

Introduction

In their seminal 1999 article, "Philanthropy's New Agenda: Creating Value," Michael Porter and Mark Kramer criticized foundations for not taking full advantage of their privileged position of controlling billions of discretionary charitable dollars: "Not enough foundations think strategically about how they can create the most value for society with the resources they have at their disposal" (p. 122). Porter and Kramer argued that strategy should be central to the practice of philanthropy. Just as businesses need to execute a clear and coherent strategy to succeed in the marketplace, foundations need to clarify their goals, identify strategic leverage points, and focus their resources on the highest payoff activities, programs, people, and organizations.

Over the subsequent 17 years, much more has been written regarding strategic philanthropy – what it is, what it isn't, what it requires of foundations, how it affects grantees, how to measure if it's working, and whether it's actually good for the world (e.g., Brest, 2005; Dorfman, 2008; Buteau, Buchanan, & Brock, 2009; Kramer, 2009; Patrizi & Heid Thompson, 2011; Kimball & Kopell, 2011; Brest, 2012; Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014;). While there remain a number of open questions and unresolved debates, it is safe to say that foundations are increasingly coming to appreciate that they need to have a coherent and well-grounded strategy[1] if they have any hope of creating a discernible impact in the world.

In a 2007 survey of foundations with over $100 million in assets conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), 89 percent of the responding chief executive officers and program staff reported that they use the word "strategy" to describe how their foundation goes about achieving its goals. The majority of these foundations had adopted a formal strategic plan, but some referred to more implicit strategies (Buteau, et al., 2009).

[1] The literature is replete with conceptualizations of "strategy" that differ in terms of the loftiness of the goals, the time horizon, and the specificity of activities, outcomes, and pathways (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005; Patton & Patrizi, 2010; Patton, Foote, & Radner, 2015).

In other words, foundation strategies are often grounded in a weak or vague "theory of change." These theories fail to take into account the full range of factors that contribute to the problem the foundation is hoping to solve, as well as other efforts underway in the community that either complement or compete with the work that the foundation is funding or stimulating.

Problems With Foundation Strategy

Having a strategy – even an explicit strategy – does not guarantee that a foundation will actually achieve its goals. Buteau, et al., (2009) argue that in order to operate in a "strategic" fashion, a foundation needs to make its decisions based on a variety of information, including information from external sources, and to map out the logical connections that explain how its resources and actions will lead to the desired outcomes. A number of organizational and evaluation consultants who work with foundations have made the case that these conditions are frequently not met (Patton & Patrizi, 2010; Patrizi & Heid Thompson, 2011; Patrizi, et al., 2013; Patton, et al., 2015). They point out that foundations often develop their strategies in insulated settings – board retreats and staff meetings – without the benefit of harsh critics and doubters. The resultant strategies are too often grounded in idealized theories of how change occurs and overly confident assessments of the foundation's ability to influence the course of events. In other words, foundation strategies are often grounded in a weak or vague "theory of change."[2] These theories fail to take into account the full range of factors that contribute to the problem the foundation is hoping to solve, as well as other efforts underway in the community that either complement or compete with the work that the foundation is funding or stimulating.

With an incomplete understanding of the problem and the context, the foundation develops a strategy that is based on unrealistic expectations of what will happen in response to the foundation's package of inputs (e.g., grantmaking, convening, capacity building, advocacy). Within the theory of change, the foundation's inputs look potent enough to generate impact, but once the strategy is introduced into the real world, a thousand underappreciated factors come into play and dwarf whatever influence stems from the foundation's strategy.

Along these same lines, foundation strategies tend to over-assume what other actors will be willing and able to accomplish. Many foundations presume that they can use their financial resources to recruit well-positioned people and organizations to join into their strategy – as grantees, intermediaries, or "partners." In fact, these actors may be less than committed to serving as agents of the foundation's strategy (CEP, 2013). If these actors do join with the foundation, they may not be capable of operating in the envisioned manner. And even if they are both willing and able, it might turn out that the organization doesn't have as much influence over conditions, people, policy, etc., as the strategy presumes.

Beyond making unrealistic assumptions in designing their strategies, foundations also fail to adapt their strategies based on what is learned – or what should have been learned (Buteau, et al., 2009; Patrizi, et al., 2013; Coffman, et al.,

[2] A theory of change delineates the pathway(s) through which a foundation's resources and actions will translate into outcomes and impacts – initially the changes that are expected to occur among the organizations that are directly touched by the foundation (e.g., new or improved programming, increased organizational capacity, stronger leadership role in the community, more collaboration or networking with other actors), and ultimately the broader and deeper improvements in well-being that the foundation is seeking (Weiss, 1995; Patrizi & Heid Thompson, 2011; Patton, et al., 2015).

2013; Kania, et al., 2014). Foundations too often stick with whatever strategy is initially implemented, sometimes because that is what the board approved and sometimes because the foundation doesn't have the interest or ability to adapt its strategy based on evaluation data. This shortcoming is particularly problematic in cases where the foundation has a simplistic, unrealistic, and/or overly deterministic theory of change. But even when a foundation is rigorous in developing its strategy, a number of realities and issues will not be apparent in the design phase. It is also critical to acknowledge that the environment within which the foundation does its work will inevitably shift in ways that influence the strategy's effectiveness, either negatively or positively.

Building on Henry Mintzberg's (2007) concept of emergent strategy, a number of writers have called on foundations to adjust their strategies on an ongoing basis through formative or developmental evaluation, as well as disciplined learning (Patrizi, et al., 2013; Coffman, et al., 2013; Kania, et al., 2014). The evaluation needs to provide quick-turnaround assessments of how the strategy is being implemented, how the key actors are responding, what is working according to expectations, and what isn't. In addition to helping the foundation to refine its strategy, the evaluation should also lead to a more complete and accurate view of the environment within which the strategy is being implemented, as well as a deeper understanding of how change occurs or might occur within that environment. Patton and Patrizi (2010) point out that this sort of strategy evaluation requires a broader lens and more adaptive methods than are typically applied in program evaluations. Snow, Lynn, & Beer, (2015) offer a nice example of how the Colorado Health Foundation evolved its advocacy strategy based on this sort of wide-ranging and nimble evaluation approach. But these intentional, thoughtful, data-driven adaptations to strategy are more the exception than the norm in philanthropy.

Challenges With Implementing Strategy

The literature cited above has begun to build awareness among foundations of shortcomings in strategy design and evaluation. This article focuses on another critical shortcoming that has received less attention – inadequate implementation. Even if a foundation has a well-designed strategy (grounded in data, theory, and logic) and a rigorous system for evaluating and adapting the strategy, there still remains the task of ensuring that the activities specified in the strategy are fully implemented. To quote Thomas Edison, "Vision without execution is hallucination."

By definition a new strategy represents a change in direction for the organization that develops and executes it. For a foundation, this implies changes in practice among program officers and other foundation staff, new messages to various constituents, revised organizational procedures, and possibly new policies to accommodate the new work.

By definition a new strategy represents a change in direction for the organization that develops and executes it. For a foundation, this implies changes in practice among program officers and other foundation staff, new messages to various constituents, revised organizational procedures, and possibly new policies to accommodate the new work. Patrizi and Heid Thompson (2011) contend that foundations have often fallen short in their strategies because they do not take the time to map out the new work that staff needs to carry out and to identify prevailing practices that need to shift. Likewise, Davis, Bearman, and McDonald (2015) observe that, "Although many funders value practice in theory, it's not always evident in their day-to-day work."

This failure to translate strategy into practice is due in part to a blind spot on the part of foundations. According to Patrizi and Heid Thompson (2011), "Beyond funding grantees, most strategies focus on what others will do" (p. 57). In other words, the intended impacts of the strategy are expected to occur through new actions on the part of grantees and partner organizations. Foundation staff and trustees don't look in the mirror to see that the strategy requires that they will likely need to change their own behavior as well.[3] If a foundation doesn't fully recognize its own role in generating the desired impacts, it won't make the organizational changes necessary to execute the strategy.

This article focuses on two defining tasks that need to be accomplished for a strategy to be implemented. The first is to operationalize the strategy in the form of specific functions, activities, and performance metrics for foundation staff. The second is to create an organizational infrastructure (defined in terms of staffing, structures, processes, policies, culture, etc.) that is conducive to carrying out the activities that the strategy requires.

In order to promote effective implementation, we urge foundation staff and trustees to consider the following two sets of questions as they develop their strategies:

1. **What is required of those actors who are charged with implementing the strategy?** What actions do they need to carry out? What decisions do they need to make? What sorts of relationships do they need to build? What mindset do they need to bring to the work? And what competencies are required to carry out this body of work?

2. **What else is required of the foundation to ensure that the strategy is implemented as intended?** What sorts of supports does the foundation need to provide in order for the implementing actors to be successful? Does the foundation need to hire staff with new competencies? How does the foundation need to change its administrative processes and policies to support full implementation of the strategy? Does the organizational structure or culture need to change in order to be aligned with the strategy?

The field of implementation science offers a set of tools to help foundations answer these questions and to put in place the supports that are needed to implement a strategy. Implementation science is concerned with the design and implementation of interventions that are aimed at improving conditions and outcomes among a defined population. This might be a new model of service, a medical treatment, a public-health intervention, or any of a number of deliberate approaches to attain an individual- or societal-level outcome. For the purposes of this article, we focus specifically on foundation strategy as the intervention to be designed and implemented.

Frameworks, tools, and research from implementation science are helpful in determining precisely what is required to implement a foundation's strategy. This article highlights two concepts that appear to us to be under-appreciated within philanthropy: practice profiles and implementation drivers. A practice profile translates a program or organizational strategy into specific functions and activities that need to be carried out by those staff members who are responsible for implementation. Implementation drivers point to a specific set of organizational factors (e.g., selection, supervision, and training of staff; administrative processes; financial resources; leadership; culture) that determine whether a program or strategy is implemented well enough to achieve its intended outcomes.

After introducing some general principles of implementation science, we provide in-depth descriptions of each of these two concepts, focusing specifically on the implementation of foundation strategy. "Using Implementation Science to Translate Foundation Strategy," which accompanies this article (Metz and Easterling, 2016), discusses how the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust has used these practice profiles and implementation drivers to redefine the work of its

[3] Easterling and Csuti (1999) made a parallel point with regard to evaluation, arguing that foundations generally focus their evaluation efforts on assessing whether grantees are meeting expectations without evaluating the foundation's own behavior and its effect on grantees.

program officers and to revamp organizational structures and processes to align with its place-based initiative, Healthy Places NC.

Overview of Implementation Science

Implementation science refers to the "methods or techniques used to enhance the adoption, implementation, and sustainability" of an intervention (Powell, et al, 2015; Fixsen, Blase, Metz & Van Dyke, 2015). Within this definition, an "intervention" is a defined effort to create a particular set of outcomes. The field of implementation science is concerned with what it takes for an intervention to produce value – and especially optimal value – for its intended beneficiaries.

Within this frame, implementation scientists focus on considerations such as:

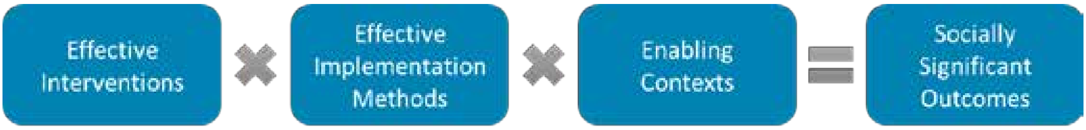
- Is the intervention appropriate to the purpose and context?
- Has the intervention been operationalized in a way that allows those who are responsible for carrying it out to know what is expected of them?
- Are they specifically aware of how their work needs to change as the implementation unfolds (i.e., stage-specific activities and modes of operating)?
- Do they have the necessary competencies?
- Does the organization provide the supports that staff requires to implement the strategy as designed and intended?
- Are there data systems and procedures in place to promote learning and adaption?
- Are the various partners and stakeholders engaged and supportive?
- Are the policy, regulatory, and funding environments hospitable to implementing the intervention effectively?
- Are there feedback loops in place that allow learnings from the field to inform policymakers who have influence over the intervention?

Contrary to the prevailing conversation in philanthropy, implementation science does not equate "effective" with "evidence-based." Rather, an effective intervention is one that is deliberately chosen using available knowledge to suit the needs of the target population, the intent of the organization, and the context within which that organization operates. In other words, the intervention is "appropriate" if it is:

- *matched to demonstrated need among the target population,*
- *takes into account the available research evidence, and*
- *feasible to implement within the given context.*

Among implementation scientists, the commonly accepted starting point is selecting an effective intervention. Contrary to the prevailing conversation in philanthropy, implementation science does not equate "effective" with "evidence-based." Rather, an effective intervention is one that is deliberately chosen using available

FIGURE 1 Implementation Science Formula Describing Requirements for Success



knowledge to suit the needs of the target population, the intent of the organization, and the context within which that organization operates. In other words, the intervention is "appropriate" if it is:

- matched to demonstrated need among the target population,
- takes into account the available research evidence, and
- feasible to implement within the given context.

Once an appropriate intervention has been selected, the next step is to operationalize it. This is where the specific work and way of working are mapped out in concrete terms. Even programs that are evidence-based or evidence-informed need to be operationalized in order to be effective in a particular context. However, most health and human services agencies fail to complete this step when they put a new program or service in place (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011; Stirman, et al., 2012).

After operationalizing an appropriate intervention, the organization begins the actual process of implementation. Successful outcomes require both effective implementation methods and an enabling context. Effective implementation methods means that the people responsible for implementing the intervention have the competencies that the intervention requires and they employ effective methods to carry out, improve, and sustain the intervention. An enabling context means that the organization delivering the intervention has instituted administrative and technological processes to support those responsible for carrying out the intervention.

The context also includes conditions outside the implementing organization, including conditions that are controlled by funders, regulatory agencies, and partner organizations. For the context to be truly "enabling," all these stakeholders need to provide the resources and commitment that allows the implementing actors to carry out the required work, while also supporting the process of ongoing learning and optimization. (See Figure 1.)

The formula in Figure 1 summarizes these ideas. In order to obtain the socially significant outcomes that the organization has in mind, it needs to select an effective intervention, implement the intervention with effective methods, and carry out this work within an enabling context. These three conditions refer to what is implemented, how it is implemented, and where it is implemented. The formula is multiplicative because weakness in any of these three areas will severely compromise the possibility of achieving the intended outcomes.

It is useful to point out that implementation science shares much of the thinking and some of the tools that exist within program evaluation, especially from a formative or developmental framework (Patton, 2011). Throughout the process of implementing an intervention, implementation science emphasizes the need for continuous quality improvement through the systematic assessment and feedback of information and data related to planning, implementation, and outcomes (Chinman, Imm, & Wandersman, 2004). Reflecting and evaluating refers to "quantitative and qualitative feedback about the progress and quality of implementation accompanied with regular personal and team debriefing about progress and experience" (Damschroder, et al., 2009, p. 11).

Implementation science focuses specifically on "improvement cycles" as a means of refining interventions based on feedback. In other words, implementation science presumes that interventions (and especially strategies) will evolve. One of the best-known improvement cycles is the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle (Deming, 1986; Shewhart, 1931), which is a specific form of what implementation science refers to as an "improvement cycle." Within the context of foundation strategy, the PDSA cycle calls for the following linked steps: (1) specify the plan that helps move the strategy forward, (2) focus on facilitating the implementation of the strategy, (3) develop assessments to understand how the strategy is working, and (4) make changes to the next iteration of the strategy to improve implementation and results.

Improvement cycles are one of the better-known tools that implementation science offers as a means of improving the implementation and adaptation of strategy (or any intervention). In the remainder of this article we introduce two lesser-known tools that we regard as particularly valuable, especially with regard to implementing foundation strategy, practice profiles and implementation drivers.

Operationalizing Strategy Using Practice Profiles

When a foundation adopts a new strategy, it will invariably require new ways of acting, interacting, and even thinking among various actors inside and outside the foundation. These new requirements, however, are often not clearly specified within the documents that describe the strategy. This leads to uncertainty, differences in perception, and possibly confusion among those who are charged with implementing the strategy (Hall & Hord, 2006). Managers and evaluators may find it difficult to determine if the strategy is actually being implemented. More fundamentally, failing to translate a strategy into concrete expectations and specific work makes it unlikely that the strategy will achieve its intended outcomes, regardless of how much theory or evidence supports the strategy.

A practice profile operationalizes an intervention in the form of specific functions and activities that a particular implementing actor needs to carry out. Practice profiles provide the people who are charged with carrying out the strategy with a clear and concrete description of what they are expected to do.

When presenting staff members with the responsibility to implement a new program or strategy, it is important to also describe the core activities and expected benefits associated with this new way of working (Cooke, 2000; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Ringwalt, et al., 2003). In the terminology of implementation science, operationalizing an intervention makes it "implementable" and "useable."

A practice profile operationalizes an intervention in the form of specific functions and activities that a particular implementing actor needs to carry out. Practice profiles provide the people who are charged with carrying out the strategy with a clear and concrete description of what they are expected to do. Position-specific profiles are developed for each implementing actor.

In the general case, practice profiles answer the question, "What does the intervention require of those actors who are responsible for implementing it?" In the case of a foundation strategy, we are particularly interested in the implications for program officers. The program officer's role is comparable to what practitioners do in many health and human services settings (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). In both cases, the program officer and practitioner

The strategy's underlying values and principles should apply to all actors with responsibility for implementation. Thus, each practice profile associated with a strategy will have the same starting point. There may, however, be variation across actors with regard to those values or principles most relevant to their work.

can be described as "interventionists." While considering the program officer as interventionist may be a new concept for foundations, it demonstrates explicitly that a strategy's success depends on specifying the program officers' new work and supporting them in executing the required functions and activities. We provide an example of a practice profile in the accompanying article that focuses on Healthy Places NC (Metz and Easterling, 2016).[4]

Components of a Practice Profile

Developing a practice profile is equivalent to operationalizing a strategy for a particular implementing actor. The process involves constructing:

1. a clear description of the values and principles that undergird the strategy;

2. a clear description of the essential functions that define the strategy;

3. operational definitions of the essential functions (Metz, Bartley, Blase, & Fixsen, 2011; Hall & Hord, 2006), or in other words, the core activities that allow the essential functions to be teachable, learnable, and doable by staff or practitioners as a set of activities for staff or practitioner to conduct; and

4. practical assessments of the performance of staff or partners who are implementing the strategy (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013).

These components reflect four increasingly specific ways of defining what a strategy looks like when it is being implemented by a particular actor. All four levels are critical to gaining a full understanding of what actors should do and how they should approach various situations when carrying out the strategy.

How Are Practice Profiles Developed?

The first step in developing a practice profile is to identify or affirm the values and principles on which the strategy is based. Depending on the strategy, the foundation might be guided by such values and principles as transparent grantmaking, engaging new partners, power sharing, collaboration, respecting local wisdom and decisions, organizational learning, data-driven decision making, or encouraging the adoption of evidence-based programs.

Values and principles are often a focus area when foundations develop their strategies, in which case the first step involves affirming and clarifying. But sometimes, the strategy is defined primarily in terms of what will happen rather than how things should happen. In this case, foundation leaders and trustees may need to engage in the fundamental work of defining the philosophy, principles, and values that they are seeking to advance with the strategy.

The strategy's underlying values and principles should apply to all actors with responsibility for implementation. Thus, each practice profile associated with a strategy will have the same starting point. There may, however, be variation across actors with regard to those values or principles most relevant to their work.

[4] For the practice profile tool, see http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol8/iss2/13.

Once the strategy's values, principles, expectations, and overall approach are defined, the next step is to identify the essential functions of each of the implementing actors. Essential functions describe in functional terms how the implementing actor is supporting the success of the strategy. These functions might pertain to communicating various messages to various audiences, interacting with grantees and applicants, facilitating community processes, encouraging or coaching local actors, advocating for policies or community change, or assisting with evaluation and learning. Each strategy generates its own distinct set of essential functions for the various implementing actors.

The next stage in operationalizing the strategy is to identify the core activities that go along with each function. Core activities describe the concrete behaviors that foundation staff carries out, day to day, to bring the essential functions to life. What should we observe the staff doing as they communicate with different audiences, interact with grantees and partners, facilitate meetings, build capacity, etc.? Specifying these core activities allows the new strategy to be teachable, learnable, doable, and assessable.

Once the essential functions have been operationalized in the form of concrete behaviors and activities, it becomes possible to assess staff performance. The practice profile eventually will include specific performance metrics that allow for an ongoing assessment of how fully foundation staff and leadership are implementing the strategy as intended. These performance data are crucial in supervising, training, and coaching these implementing actors so that the strategy is optimally implemented.

The major challenge in developing a profile is to ensure that the implementing actor's work is both aligned with the theory of change that undergirds the foundation's strategy and consistent with the research and best practices on how to carry out the work that the strategy requires. To meet these two requirements, implementation science researchers have developed a five-step methodology for creating and refining practice profiles: (1) review of initiative-related documents; (2) systematic scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005); (3) semistructured interviews; (4) vetting and consensus; and (5) testing and evolving the practice profile (Metz, 2016). The accompanying article describes how these steps were carried out in developing the practice profile for the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust program officers who carry out Healthy Places NC.

How Are Practice Profiles Used?

Practice profiles are valuable in selecting and supporting the people who are responsible for implementing a strategy. In particular, the essential functions and core activities point to specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that need to be in place for a program officer to meet the expectations associated with the profile. Recruitment and hiring can be tailored to find individuals with the necessary competencies. Likewise, training and coaching strategies for newly hired staff can then be tailored to reinforce and grow these same competencies.

Beyond translating a strategy into specific functions and activities, developing a practice profile will often point out where the strategy is underspecified or unrealistic. The first version of the profile may call for actions and outcomes that are unlikely to be realized in practice.

From a quality-assurance perspective, a detailed practice profile provides indicators to assess implementation quality. A comprehensive evaluation of a foundation's strategy will include not only an assessment of longer-term outcomes and impacts, but also an ongoing process evaluation of how and how fully the strategy is being implemented (Patton & Patrizi, 2010). The practice profile is valuable because it describes what "good" implementation looks like, and thus provides a standard against which actual implementation can be compared.[5] From a learning and improvement perspective, these regular assessments of implementation (i.e., the extent

[5] Ideally, implementation of the strategy will be assessed not only from the perspective of the foundation staff and consultants who are delivering resources and acting in specified ways, but also from those who are on the receiving end of the strategy.

IMPLENTATION SCIENCE

In carrying out the functions in the practice profile, the foundation's staff is, by definition, implementing the foundation's strategy. As they learn about the effects and the effectiveness of their actions, they are also learning which of the strategy's assumptions are accurate and which are off base. In other words, the practice profile provides an analytic framework for testing the validity of strategy's underlying theory and for improving the strategy.

to which the practice profile is implemented as intended) facilitate reflection, remediation, and adaptation of the practice profile.

Beyond their role in monitoring and improving the performance of the people who implement the strategy, performance metrics derived from the practice profile are helpful in evaluating the strategy per se. In carrying out the functions in the practice profile, the foundation's staff is, by definition, implementing the foundation's strategy. As they learn about the effects and the effectiveness of their actions, they are also learning which of the strategy's assumptions are accurate and which are off base. In other words, the practice profile provides an analytic framework for testing the validity of strategy's underlying theory and for improving the strategy.

Virtually all foundation strategies will be suboptimal in their first incarnation (Mintzberg, 2007; Patton & Patrizi, 2010; Patrizi, et al., 2013; Kania, et al., 2014). As such, refinement is an inevitable and important aspect of strategy implementation (Mintzberg, 2007; Patrizi, et al., 2013; Chambers, Glasgow, & Stange, 2013). Effective change, however, rests on the premise that we know what we are changing. Performance metrics derived from a practice profile facilitate data-informed adjustments to both the design and implementation of strategy.

Implementation Drivers

New strategies typically impose new demands on the organizational infrastructure. For example, if a foundation devises a new strategy to promote community collaboration, it is likely that people and systems will need to adapt. Grant processes and funding cycles may need to be redesigned to involve local actors more collaboratively in proposal development. Program officers may need training and coaching to effectively engage community members.

Sometimes foundations make these adjustments, but more often the existing staff, job descriptions, procedures, and policies remain in place. This leads to organizational misalignments such as those described by Patton, et al. (2015). The accompanying article describes various misalignments that came to light when the Reynolds Charitable Trust implemented Healthy Places NC. In moving from a conservative-responsive style of grantmaking to an emergent community development initiative that required continual, hands-on engagement with a wide variety of local actors, the trust found that expectations for its program officers were seriously out of sync with historical practice. In addition, many of the administrative procedures underlying the grantmaking process were no longer appropriate.

The bolder the strategy, the more likely that the existing infrastructure will be out of alignment and poorly suited to support the new work that the strategy requires. This is when it is particularly crucial to test whether the organizational infrastructure is hospitable to the new strategy.

The Drivers Framework

The starting point for creating a hospitable organizational infrastructure is to identify a key areas on which to focus the organizational-change work. In other words, what are the highest-leverage factors that drive successful implementation of a strategy – or any intervention, for that matter? Implementation scientists use the term "implementation drivers" to reflect this concept (Fixsen, et al., 2005; Metz & Bartley, 2012). Three distinct clusters of implementation drivers have been identified – competency, organization, and leadership:

- Competency drivers are mechanisms to develop, improve, and sustain an individual's ability to implement a new innovation or strategy with intended benefits.
- Organization drivers intentionally develop the organizational supports and systems interventions needed to ensure that the individuals carrying out the innovation or strategy are effectively supported and that data are used for continuous improvement.
- Leadership drivers ensure that leaders are using the appropriate strategies to address implementation challenges.

These three sets of drivers form a triangular foundation for effective implementation. (See Figure 2.) Along the left side of the triangle are the competency drivers. Staff selection sits at the bottom, as an organization's first opportunity to ensure competent staff. Once staff are hired, training and coaching activities should be implemented to grow and sustain staff competence. Along the right side of the triangle are the organization drivers. Decision-support data systems should be used by organizations to ensure that timely, relevant, and actionable information is collected and used to improve the intervention or strategy. Administrative and systems support must also be put in place to create the enabling context for staff to carry out the expectations of the new intervention or strategy. At the base of the triangle is leadership; effective leaders support the installation of each of the competency

FIGURE 2 Implementation Drivers

IMPLENTATION SCIENCE

An Implementation Drivers Assessment is a tool based in implementation science that identifies new supports that an organization needs to put into place, as well as existing organizational features that need to be revised or removed. The assessment asks specific questions about the three sets of implementation drivers with the intent of testing whether the organization has in place the specific supports that the strategy requires.

and organization drivers so that these drivers are in service to the new way of work.

Fidelity sits at the top of the triangle. Fidelity is defined as the extent to which delivery of an intervention or strategy adheres to the intended principles and components. When the implementation drivers are fully and effectively engaged, we should observe fidelity in the delivery of the intervention. For example, using recruitment and hiring protocols that assess for competencies associated with the new way of working increases the likelihood of selecting staff that will have the skills necessary to carry out the new strategy. As another example, ensuring that data systems capture information that can be used to assess and improve the implementation of the new strategy increases the likelihood that the strategy will be implemented as intended.

The upward flow of arrows signifies that the drivers support not only fidelity, but also optimization of the strategy. This occurs through ongoing experiments, which lead to cyclical improvements in both the delivery and the design of the strategy. Optimal delivery of an optimal strategy is how the foundation produces expected and reliable outcomes for the intended beneficiaries.

The middle of the triangle denotes the integrated and compensatory nature of the drivers. The more integrated the drivers, the more effectively the strategy will be implemented. For example, if an organization identifies the competencies needed to use a new intervention or strategy, then selection, training, and coaching drivers should all be in service to developing, improving, and sustaining those same competencies. The drivers can also be compensatory. For example, if an organization is unable to hire new staff for the new way of work, robust training and coaching drivers can be used to compensate.

Assessing Implementation Drivers for a Particular Strategy

On the surface it may appear that the organization has the people, procedures, systems, and supports that would allow a new strategy to be implemented. Digging deeper, most foundations that shift their strategic direction will find that many aspects of the organization are supporting old ways of work. When a foundation adopts a new strategy, it is crucial to make visible the existing infrastructure. This is the first step in putting the needed infrastructure in place. Both transformative and incremental changes will be needed to create a visible infrastructure that is truly in service to new strategies.

An Implementation Drivers Assessment is a tool based in implementation science that identifies new supports that an organization needs to put into place, as well as existing organizational features that need to be revised or removed. The assessment asks specific questions about the three sets of implementation drivers with the intent of testing whether the organization has in place the specific supports that the strategy requires.

An Implementation Drivers Assessment can be in the form of either quantitative ratings or qualitative interviews. In either case, the assessment generates an analysis of which best practices are in place for each driver and makes recommendations for strengthening each driver. One example of the quantitative approach is described in Fixsen, et al., (2015). This approach relies on a particular rating scale developed by the National Implementation Research Network to assess how fully the organization supports program implementation at distinct stages of the process.

The qualitative approach, which relies on interviews with multiple actors inside and outside the organization, is more flexible and is well suited to the case of foundation strategy. With a qualitative approach, data are collected through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by an outside organization with expertise in the assessment process. The purposes of the interviews are to better understand the current functioning of each implementation driver and the extent to which implementation drivers are in service to new ways of work associated with the intervention or strategy. It is crucial to gather multiple perspectives on ways to strengthen each driver. The structure of the interview ensures flexibility in how and in what sequence questions are asked, and in whether and how particular areas are followed up and explored with different interviewees. The structure also ensures that the interview is shaped by best practices for each implementation driver. The implementation drivers offer a science-based framework for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information, which leads to a more normative analysis than occurs with typical organizational assessments.

Qualitative methods are used to code interview data related to the extent to which best practices are perceived as present for each driver and suggestions for strengthening each driver to support implementation of the organization's new intervention or strategy. A summary of findings and recommendations are shared with organizational leadership and staff. Findings are not shared for each interview respondent or groups of respondents (e.g., leaders, staff) in order to maintain anonymity for those who participate. Findings are meant to promote reflection and action planning for the organization. The accompanying article describes this process in the case of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.

Implications for Creating a Hospitable Infrastructure

Assessing a foundation's standing on the three sets of implementation drivers provides tailored guidance on what needs to change to ensure that there is support for implementation. From a more general perspective, implementation scientists have identified a set of best practices within the drivers framework (Fixsen, et al., 2005; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). The following recommendations are particularly relevant in the case where a foundation strategy is the intervention that is being implemented, tested, and improved.

Building Staff Competency

Effective staffing requires the specification of required skills, abilities, and other prerequisite characteristics. Once these prerequisites have been identified, the foundation needs to decide whether existing staff have the required competencies or, at the very least, can gain those competencies through training and coaching.

- *Selection*. Regardless of whether or not the foundation retains its existing staff, it needs to look ahead to hiring new staff with the required competencies. This requires recruitment methods that will identify qualified candidates, protocols for interviewing candidates, and criteria for selection. Comparable procedures need to be in place to bring on partners who have the required skills as delineated in their respective practice profiles.

- *Training*. Staff and partners involved at foundations need to learn when, how, and with whom to use new skills and practices. Training should provide knowledge related to the theory and underlying values of the approach, use adult learning theory, introduce the components and rationales of key practices, and provide opportunities to practice new skills to

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create and receive feedback in a safe and supportive training environment.

- *Coaching.* Most new skills can be introduced in training, but must be practiced and mastered on the job with the help of a coach. Implementation science would recommend that the foundation develop and implement formal plans that stipulate where, when, with whom, and why coaching will occur. The foundation should also use multiple sources of data to provide feedback to program officers and staff, including direct observation, and use coaching data to improve practice and organizational performance.

- *Performance assessment for foundation staff and partners.* Evaluation of staff performance is designed to assess the application and outcomes of skills that are reflected in selection criteria, taught in training, and reinforced in coaching. In implementing its strategy the foundation should develop and implement transparent staff and partner performance assessments, use multiple sources of data to assess performance, institute positive recognition so assessments are seen as an opportunity to improve performance, and use performance-assessment data to improve practice and ensure fidelity to strategy implementation.

Building the Right Structures and Systems

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One of the most crucial areas for infrastructure development involves the data systems that the foundation has in place for monitoring grants, tracking proposals, assessing performance, and evaluating the processes and outcomes associated with individual grants and initiatives. These data systems need to be designed or redesigned so that they are able to support implementation, assessment, and improvement of the strategy. Implementation science brings intentionality to an organization's various data systems so that they become "decision-support data systems." These systems include quality-assurance, fidelity, and outcome data. Data need to be reliable, reported frequently, built into practice routines, accessible at actionable levels, and used to make decisions.

The Special Role of Organizational Culture

Among the many elements of organizational infrastructure, culture is arguably the most important when testing for alignment. It is also the element that is most likely to derail an innovative strategy. Culture refers to the behavioral norms and expectations that exist within an organization (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006), and more commonly is described as the "way things are done around here." Culture influences – and often constrains – the choices that an organization is willing and able to make in order to bring people, processes, procedures, and policies in line with strategy.

In a recent Grantmakers for Effective Organizations publication, Tom David and Kathleen Enright (2015) contend that a foundation's strategy is "unlikely to yield progress without fundamental changes to organizational culture to match funders' strategic aspirations" (p. 4). Research on the implementation of innovations in health and human services underscores this point, demonstrating that assessing and addressing organizational norms, expectations, and perceptions are necessary components for the effective implementation of innovations (Glisson, et al., 2008).

Both organizational culture and the infrastructure it supports are often invisible to staff within an organization. This makes it all too easy to ignore or wish away any misalignment between what the foundation is and what it needs to be in order to support its new strategy. This problem is confounded by the fact that the "invisible infrastructure" often reflects and maintains the status quo within the organization (Koerth-Baker, 2012). When a major shift in approach and expectations is introduced, the invisible infrastructure "fights back" and jeopardizes effective implementation of an innovation (Metz & Albers, 2014).

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Creating Lasting Change Through Leadership

Administrators provide leadership and make use of a wide range of data to inform decision making, support the overall processes, and keep staff organized and focused on the desired innovation outcomes. Foundations should ensure leadership is committed to the new strategy and available to address challenges and create solutions.

The organizational changes required by a new strategy can be profound. The CEO and other leaders play a crucial role in creating the conditions that allow for these transitions. Their job includes gaining buy-in from staff on the value of a transition to a new strategy; addressing challenges and creating solutions; developing clear communication protocols and feedback loops; adjusting and developing policies and procedures to support the new way of work; and clarifying the rationale, pathway, and imperative of whatever shifts in organizational culture are required to implement the new strategy. That last task should not be underestimated.

Summary

One of the key insights from implementation science is that organizations fail to operationalize

Foundations can only improve their strategic impact when their strategies are well defined, allowing for testing, adapting, and optimizing the strategy in practice. Practice profiles are a tool for operationalizing a conceptually defined strategy through the assessment of data and information related to strategy development, engagement with foundation staff who will implement the new strategy, and consensus-building activities with foundation leadership, staff, and key community partners.

their interventions in terms of the specific work that staff and partners need to carry out. This is certainly true of many foundations when they develop and attempt to implement strategic initiatives. The practice profile offers a particular means of operationalizing strategy. It would be useful for foundations to incorporate this step explicitly into their strategy-development process – prior to introducing the strategy to the world, and certainly prior to engaging grantees and partner organizations in conversations about their role in executing the strategy.

The practice profile can be viewed as an extension of the strategy-development process. Foundations can only improve their strategic impact when their strategies are well defined, allowing for testing, adapting, and optimizing the strategy in practice. Practice profiles are a tool for operationalizing a conceptually defined strategy. This occurs through the assessment of data and information related to strategy development, the active engagement of foundation staff who will implement the new strategy, and consensus-building activities with foundation leadership, staff, and key community partners. Practice profiles provide greater specificity of the strategy, which improves the likelihood that foundation staff can competently execute the activities designed to bring a foundation's values, vision, and mission to life in real-world interactions.

Similarly, the Implementation Drivers Assessment provides the foundation with critical data for bringing the overall organization into alignment with a new strategy. This assessment can be viewed as a complement to the "theory of philanthropy" approach that Patton, et al., (2015) recently introduced. Both methods are aimed at producing alignment between a foundation's strategy and its organizational processes, policies, staffing, and culture. The two approaches differ primarily with regard to sequencing. The "theory of philanthropy" approach is a comprehensive and simultaneous analysis of all aspects of the foundation's role, mission, philosophy strategy, staffing, processes, resources, and culture. The overarching questions are: (1) What kind of foundation do we want to be? and (2) How do we need to act and structure ourselves in order to be that kind of foundation? Some aspects are taken as given, especially mission and values, but all the remaining aspects are open for consideration and reconfiguration.

In contrast, implementation science – and, more specifically, the Implementation Drivers framework – focuses on the development of an infrastructure in service to a selected strategy. It assumes that the organization has chosen a strategy that fits its mission, values, and vision. What remains open for analysis and revising is the organizational infrastructure, including staff positions, the people in those positions, supervisory structures, administrative processes, resource allocation, leadership, and organizational culture.

Developing a theory of philanthropy can be a useful step in aligning a foundation's strategy with its mission, values, goals, procedures, staff capacities, organizational structure, and culture. However, once the theory has been articulated, the foundation still must wrestle with the difficult task of putting the strategy into practice. Implementation science clarifies the new work that the strategy requires and identifies the implications that this new work will have for everyone within the foundation, as well as for procedures, systems, and culture.

Likewise, recognizing that the foundation's strategy will evolve is crucial in orienting the board and staff to the importance of evaluation, learning, and adaptation. But even with an adaptive mindset, the foundation needs guidance on how to translate its learning into appropriate revisions to strategy. Implementation science provides the foundation with a diagnostic map of the strategy which points toward specific hypotheses that need testing and specific elements that may need refining. Specific tools drawn from implementation science, such as improvement cycles, can be directly incorporated into the implementation of strategy in order to accelerate learning and adaptation.

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IMPLENTATION SCIENCE

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