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## USING IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE TO TURN “RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE”: LESSONS LEARNED FROM INTEGRATING MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

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### Abstract

The focus of this article is to examine implementation science as applied to correctional practices. Implementation science, as posited by Fixsen (2005) and the National Implementation Research Network (NIRM), will be reviewed, with attention paid to competency drivers, as well as the degrees and stages of implementation. The purpose of this article is to convey that implementation efforts can vary in developing needed capabilities to ensure proper scale and fidelity are achieved for effective practice of a correctional approach. The adoption of Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), an emerging correctional practice, is used to describe “lessons learned” regarding several important implementation issues. This article offers six suggestions for correctional groups to improve their implementation outcomes. These suggestions are based on actual field experience and case studies of multiple implementation initiatives of Motivational Interviewing across the USA.

Keywords: implementation science, motivational interviewing, organizational readiness, practice drift, coaching and feedback, communities of practice, blended learning.

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## I. Introduction

The relationship between research and practice remains a contested area. Many implore researchers to make their work more useful and relevant to direct practice, while a parallel appeal calls practitioners to embrace research in their day-to-day work. Research findings are not often written in practitioner-friendly language, and so much of what improves practice work with offenders is “lost in translation.” Practitioners can be wary of researchers who claim superior knowledge and can stonewall important findings, which only serves to continue needless mediocrity. How can it be that “what is known is not what is adopted”? This article actively seeks a better alliance between researcher and practitioner – believing that an improved relationship will allow correctional services to reap a harvest of benefits.

Earnest conversations regarding research-to-practice – discussions that move beyond fanciful wish or “someday” ideas – must eventually find their way to implementation science; a necessity because the terms “intervention” and “implementation” are completely different from each other. Implementation becomes a bridge between research-investigation and intervention-fieldwork. Implementation science expert, Prof. Dean Fixsen, PhD, at the University of North Carolina, a member of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRM) once posed a question: “If evidence-based practice is the ‘serum’ then what implementation tools and methods can act as your ‘syringe?’” (Fixen, et.al, 2005). Curative serums (the mindsets and skillsets of Evidence-Based Practices) that can improve the body’s health (improved offender behavior / community safety) must be somehow injected into the body (direct practice / correctional services). We look to implementation science to help us blend “know” into “know-how.” As a field, we have discovered that cabinets full of paperwork and the manuals which line our agency shelves do not equal innovative practices. While the folders and manuals may represent what is known about effective interventions, knowledge – by itself – is not transformation. Implementation science consists of three main drivers: competency, leadership and organization (Fixsen et al., 2005). The scope of this article will examine the aspect of ‘competency’ drivers. It will investigate issues of implementation science, examining lessons-learned from importing Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Stinson & Clark), in press), an evidence-based practice into correctional agencies. A brief introduction of Motivational Interviewing or “MI” is warranted.

## II. Motivational Interviewing

MI is an approach that helps staff incorporate a working knowledge of human motivation into their practice, to communicate with people about change—and ultimately—to facilitate an offender’s readiness to change. It first emerged from work with addictions but has since widened its reach, becoming a favored approach for use with populations in a variety of settings (Burke, Arkowitz, & Dunn, 2002), including criminal justice agencies (Birgden, 2004; McMurran, 2002; Farrall, 2002), probation (Walters, Clark, Gingerich, & Meltzer, 2007; Clark, 2005; Ginsburg et.al, 2002; Harper & Hardy, 2000; Miller, 1999), and corrections (Antiss, Polaschek & Wilson, 2011). Broadly, this growth in the use of MI parallels the current drive to move beyond a sole focus on compliance and embrace the “business of behavior change” in corrections and criminal justice (Clark, et. al, 2006). Internationally, correctional agencies have begun to incorporate motivational interviewing within their offender treatment and re-entry services, for both mental health or specialty service professionals as well as direct line staff. More than 30 nations have adopted Motivational Interviewing for use within their courts, prisons, and community corrections and supervision agencies, as is evidenced by the

availability of trainers and trainings in multiple languages and locations (Stinson & Clark, in press).

Historically, motivation has been viewed as a more-or-less fixed characteristic of offenders, much like adult height or eye color. This would suggest than an offender presents with a certain motivational "profile," and until that individual is ready for change, there is little that you can do to influence his or her choices and behaviors. However, there is a fair amount one can do to influence an offender's chances of success. Motivation is not a fixed trait but rather a condition or state, which can be raised or lowered by how we work with an offender. With human motivation in mind, MI is an approach that prepares offenders for the work of change. It posits that people need to prepare for change, which is as true for offenders as it is for the rest of us. Corrections staff are seldom taught how to prepare offenders for change; instead, we jump to problem solving, goal setting, planning and the like, ignoring or bypassing whether the offender even feels it important to change or whether they have any confidence they can do so. With the adage in mind of "first things first" this approach offers helpful tools for establishing an empathetic and collaborative relationship. We must start by building engagement if we hope to start at all. Getting the offender to talk and trust is a primary effort, with training in basic listening and engagement strategies to help with this process.

Next steps probe for the person's values, exploring and listening for any discrepancies for how their current behavior might not match up with deeply-held values. Staff are taught to find gaps or disconnections between values and behaviors – reflecting back any discrepancies between values and actions. Motivational interviewing draws attention to the idea that it is these discrepancies that propel the offender's perceived importance of change. No discrepancy means no motivation. Discrepancy amplifies the offender's own reasons for change. Highlighting this discrepancy to create an appetite for change. Research finds that long-term change is more likely to occur for intrinsic reasons (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Quite often, what one assumes would motivate the offender simply does not. Motivational interviewing would have you discover the things that are valued by the individual offender and what also reinforces those values. The defining difference for this approach is that it evokes the offender's own intrinsic reasons for change, rather than trying to "install" our ideas as to why change is important.

### **III. There Are Different Degrees of Implementation**

Most correctional personnel have come to know that "all implementation is not created equal."

The National Implementation Research Network (Fixsen & Blase, 2007) describes three degrees of implementation: (1) paper, (2) process, and (3) performance:

1. *Paper implementation* often results when management intends to comply with the desires of an outside group, such as an accreditation organization or funding source. For example, the policy and procedures manual states that a new approach will be used. The practice manual may be placed on a shelf and staff are directed to start delivering the new approach, but training or supervision is absent. Paper implementation does not even rise to "going through the motions." By itself it is not "implementation" at all.
2. *Process implementation* is "going through the motions." New plans are put in place for training, possibly also for supervision and reporting forms. Training consists of workshops where attendance at the training event is the sole evidence offered (a priori) that staff "have been trained." Line staff supervisors or managers, may or may not, attend the training. Attendance

by upper management, wardens, judges or agency directors is infrequent and uncommon. There is no evaluation of actual change in staff performance as a result of “training,” or any determination if changes in staff behavior have impacted offender behavioral outcomes. Consultants have observed this level of implementation in many organizations who claim to be “practicing an Evidence-Based Practice.”

3. *Performance implementation* is the level that engenders the outcomes we seek. It involves not only workshop training, but coaching, evaluation of work samples, supervision of staff, ensured service delivery to inmates, parolees and probationers, as well as evaluation of effects on offender behavior change. It is only with performance implementation that both fidelity to the model and the scale of performance will be sufficient to *change staff behavior to thereby change offender behavior.*

Constraint of space prohibits a thorough account of each degree of implementation, yet there are two important benefits from a review of these three degrees of implementation. The first benefit is to recognize where implementation initiatives may have fallen short, stopping at paper or process levels, and finally, to understand the importance of ensuring the third level of performance implementation is realized.

#### **IV. Suggestions for Implementation**

This author has facilitated implementation initiatives in MI within large correctional jurisdictions (USA), as well as numerous probation departments and adjunct counseling groups who work primarily with court-involved offenders. For almost two decades I have met and interacted with management teams that direct correctional organizations. I have been fortunate to sit with these leaders from courts, agencies and facilities as they shared their accounts of implementing Motivational Interviewing within their organizations. These disclosures included both success and failure – detailing novelty and innovation as well as frustration and flops. It will be helpful to start by examining six important learning points that came to light from this implementation work:

- A. We back our way into preparation and commitment
- B. Some things are harder to learn than others.
- C. The “extinction effect” which can steal from newly acquired skills must be considered
- D. Corrections must place greater emphasis on coaching and feedback
- E. Sustaining skills involves “communities of practice” (COP)
- F. Blended learning options

##### A. We Back Our Way into Preparation and Commitment

MI is a skill-based approach which takes effort and perseverance to learn—and the faint of heart or those looking for a quick-fix need not apply. Yet correctional agencies often make this harder than it needs to be, as critical work for system readiness is often neglected. Beyond the three types of implementation (paper, process, performance) Fixsen, et al., 2005, also established six sequential stages for *performance implementation*:

- Exploration and Adoption
- Program Installation
- Initial Implementation

- Full Operation
- Innovation
- Sustainability

What is important to point out from this list is that *staff training does not occur until the second stage* (program installation)! A troublesome correlation is realized when managers, so eager to “get going,” that they forgo preparation – yet it is this very same preparation that will often decide whether an initiative continues and takes root or fades away over time. Gathering information, finding support among staff and management, reassigning agency resources, reorganizing or realigning staff, as well changes in policy and procedures – there are so many critical activities to be accomplished before the first training group is ever assembled. The problem in Corrections (and most other social services as well) is that these early efforts are almost nonexistent as everything begins with training.

Grant funding seems to be a “usual suspect.” The rollout sequence for many grants starts with training—with funding earmarked to continue the service or program once the training has ended. Starting with training is a poor beginning that often ensures trouble will be coming further down the road; a fiscal award seeming to guarantee the “cart will come before the horse.” Correctional agencies that access grant funding would be better served if there were mandates to ensure organizational readiness should be completed as part of pre-training preparation requirements. In our experience, when initiatives start with training one could almost start an imaginary stopwatch, marking time (days, weeks, months) until problems inevitably occur. These problems cause staff and management to scramble backwards to put supports in place. Headaches and frustrations can be avoided by ensuring the necessary backing and organizational supports are in place before training begins. The familiar adage “an ounce of preparation is worth a pound of cure” changes in this situation to read “preparation is prevention.” A good example of this “backing up to continue forward” was evidenced by a Motivational Interviewing Implementation initiative put in play by the State of Wyoming (USA) Department of Correction (Clark, 2015). In this instance, this correctional department found their implementation initiative had stalled after two years of training. Their response was to call all supervisors, managers and department administrators into an in-person day-long meeting to problem-solve. The result was to enact multiple organizational supports; renewing their focus by making necessary changes to policy, procedures, personnel and reallocation of duties. After backing up to put earlier implementation stage supports put in place, the initiative now enters its eighth consecutive year.

There are several early supports to consider:

- Interest and buy-in with staff
- Interest and buy-in with management/supervision
- Answering the questions, Why do we want this? How will we use this? Who will be trained? Why these staff? When? By whom? How much? How often? Managers-supervisors?
- Sustainability plans – coaching and feedback. How often? By whom? What format? MI supervision by management?
- Reallocation of duties for coaches and in-house trainers (taking some duties away if training and coaching duties are to be added)
- Changes in job specifications? Annual evaluations? New hiring practices?

### B. Some things are harder to learn than others

In the case of Motivational Interviewing, as well as many other correctional practices, there is no minimum or sufficient “dose” of training to guarantee competence. . There is a certain level of training needed to change staff behavior, though another level is needed to change offender behavior. For example, Motivational Interviewing is a skills-based practice, and these skills are very much like learning how to play golf or fly an airplane. Mastery is more than claiming a certain number of hours of didactic training. Unfortunately, staff often over-estimate their skill level, believing themselves to be more proficient than they are. Fortunately, some staff members learn and develop the skills quickly, showing early mastery. This is not always the case, however, and one must plan for continued skills training and reinforcement. People also easily fall prey to the “inoculation effect,” or believing that after minimal training, they are in no need of more. Instead, implementation is a process rather than an event. For instance, painting a room in a house is a specific, one-time event. When it is finished, you can complete the job and marvel at the new look. In contrast, overall home upkeep is a process – one of monitoring the status of multiple rooms, appliances, and systems, as well as prompt response and repair to emerging problems, routine maintenance, and continual budgeting for anticipated future needs. Such preparation is continual. The same holds true for learning and practicing Motivational Interviewing.

The time and effort needed to adequately learn MI is not always assigned. This becomes apparent when emerging correctional approaches are reviewed. In the introduction to this article, I cited an analogy posed by implementation guru Dean Fixsen, (Fixsen, et al., 1995). Fixsen used a question to offer his analogy, “If evidence-based practice is the ‘serum’ then what implementation tools and methods can act as your ‘syringe’?” In emerging offender treatment programs, MI can be given short-shrift because the complexity of skills are often misunderstood or the time needed to be able to learn to practice them competently is misjudged. Put another way, foundational skills that may be “simple-to-understand” does not mean they are “easy-to-acquire.” Fixsen’s analogy then changes to the question, “What if the ‘serum’ is not delivered in the correct dosage?”

There are many offender treatment programs to choose from – all aimed at reducing recidivism for community safety, and many of which have received some empirical support. Some of the more well-known models include: Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS; University of Cincinnati Correctional Institute), Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-arrest (STARR; Robinson, et al., 2011), varied cognitive behavioral treatments, and as variations of the cognitive behavioral model, Thinking for a Change (T4C; Bush, Glick, Taymans, & Guevera, 2011) and the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS; Bonta, et al., 2010). These approaches are based on the Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) framework that is part of the larger principles for evidence-based practice in offender work (e.g., Andrews & Carvell, 1998; Bogue, et al., 2004; Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Dowden & Andrews, 1999, 2000). They all call for Motivational Interviewing (or important elements thereof), but where does MI fit?

When offender treatment programs claim to use Motivational Interviewing, there may be little adherence to what has been described so carefully by the MI originators (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The great concern is that MI becomes merely a mirage – visible from afar but vanishing when fidelity checks are performed. Those who develop these many Correctional practices grasp the benefits of

beginning offender work with engagement, followed by work to increase cooperation and influencing motivation. However, many correctional practices execute their own programming first, adding a smattering of "Motivational Interviewing" as an afterthought.

This is not nearly as effective as starting with Motivational Interviewing, implementing this approach and allowing time for adequate skill acquisition. When MI is learned as a foundational practice, and allotted the time to attain competency in the many skills – correctional approaches can then add their unique strategies in building-block fashion. Effective treatment increases via sensible increments. I do not fault those who have authored these correctional practices or those who train these programs to staff. Instead, problems occur when people underestimate the ease with which Motivational Interviewing can be implemented and the time it takes to arrive at competent skill levels.

#### C. The "extinction effect" that can steal from newly acquired skills must be considered

Although known by many names – diminished skills, practice drift, competence drain, or skill erosion – the extinction effect is a very real problem in implementation of Motivational Interviewing. Learned skills can diminish over time, and people will also change important components of their practice, either replacing learned methods with preferred variations, or simply forgetting or disregarding important elements of the practice.

Consider what it takes to learn to play the piano. One or two days of intensive and all-day practice, possibly followed by additional training over the course of several more days, and you would have a working knowledge of the piano, as well as some rudimentary ability to play. But what if you didn't play again for months, or a year? And what if you have no further lessons? The consequences are obvious – you would no longer remember how to play, and you would be unlikely to initiate the effort. This is a common occurrence with Motivational Interviewing and other approaches in offender settings. The lack of post-training follow-up causes even skilled and well-intentioned staff members to forget what they have previously learned, and they are unlikely to use these skills in the future.

#### D. Corrections must place greater emphasis on coaching and feedback

Feedback is fundamental for any kind of learning, and immediate feedback that occurs in the moment is even more helpful. Does your agency provide ongoing coaching and feedback after training concludes? If the norm in your agency is to provide only the training, then you're in the majority. Whether training involves singular or multiple sessions, most agencies end their implementation effort with training, neglecting the importance of ongoing coaching and feedback to enhance learning and practice. Staff build skills with greater speed and competency under the helpful eye of a coach who offers feedback and correction.

Many who work with offenders operate in relative isolation, with few people observing their interactions with offenders. Yet learning is impaired in the absence of feedback, and building a mechanism for staff to receive feedback as they learn enhances performance. Feedback is fundamental for any kind of learning, and immediate feedback is even more helpful. Consider how difficult it would be to learn the skills of archery, if you *practiced in the dark!* Review of your work in session or via audio or video tapes will offer a large return of investment for the effort. Coaching allows comments, review, reactions, advice, and tips, all of which lead to improvement in your performance. Additionally, the coach should have more experience and skill in Motivational

Interviewing than the person they are instructing.

But what about experienced staff members? One might think that they need little coaching. However, coaching and feedback may be more important than accumulated experience. A consistent finding in counseling research noteworthy for corrections, for example, is that counselors with many years of practice have no better client outcomes, on average, than those who were only recently trained. This includes findings of little difference between professionals and paraprofessionals, or therapists with varying levels of experience.

How can this be? Finding no or only small differences in effectiveness between novice and experienced professionals is both surprising and distressing. We are reminded that one of the most replicated findings in medicine is the effect of experience. A surgeon who has done a particular procedure two thousand times is simply better at it than someone who has done it twice – the experienced surgeon produces better outcomes, fewer complications, and less adverse effects. How does this fit with counseling research suggesting that experience does not matter? The surgeons get constant feedback. They rarely practice alone, and when there are complications or adverse outcomes, they receive rapid feedback and the guided opportunity to make corrections.

Such coaching and feedback may come from multiple sources. Both trained supervisors and outside experts can perform this role. There is also an emerging use of in-house trainers, peer coaches, “MI champions”, coaching within communities of practice, and web-based training to facilitate peer feedback.

#### E. Sustaining skills involves “communities of practice” (COP) and blended learning options

Many agencies that have most effectively implemented a sustained effort in Motivational Interviewing have relied on peer groups who regularly meet to build skills. While the names of these groups may differ – the brownbag lunch group, lunch-and-learn, or the Tuesday 4 PM group – they share the commonality of peer-supported learning. Learning together with peers may be more enjoyable and effective than learning alone. It may be that meeting regularly with others who share the same interest and passion to improve is helpful for learning Motivational Interviewing to take off. Not only do they talk about Motivational Interviewing, but they practice skills and trade ideas within a supportive learning community. From administration to the front line, everyone assumes some ownership and responsibility for adopting a Motivational Interviewing style throughout the organization.

Supervisors play an important role in generating and supporting a cohesive, working peer skills group. As a supervisor, you can help form community of practice groups, help them to secure activities and exercises, provide some expert oversight and coaching, and then shield them from distractions or other responsibilities that may compromise their continuity. In this case, supervisors don’t necessarily have to practice Motivational Interviewing with clients, but can help it survive and support their staff.

#### **V. Blended Learning via New Technologies for Implementation and Sustainability**

Initial instruction and training in Motivational Interviewing should be followed by continued practice with feedback and coaching to improve and increase skills, and to maintain them over time. This

section examines blended learning options to achieve these goals. "Blended learning" broadly describes the practice of using in-person classroom instruction in combination with distance education via web-based instruction (Bonk & Graham, 2006). In the past, distance education would have meant little more than occasional phone conferencing with small groups or occasional phone coaching and consultation. As technology advanced, offender agencies and other organizations were able to provide training and coaching via not only speakerphone and teleconferencing technology, but also web-based instruction, webinars, webcam meetings, video conferencing, and smart phone technology. It will be helpful to briefly examine several of these methods that are gaining greater acceptance as implementation, practice, and sustainability tools for offender agencies and systems. A table (1.1) is used to summarize four types of blended learning options:

*Table 1.1- Blended Learning Options*

| Tele-conferencing / PODS   |
|--|
| Description: Though telephone-conference is likely familiar to most readers, there are new developments with this approach that make it attractive to coaches and trainers of Motivational Interviewing. One of these are trainings in "pods." In a pod, three staff are matched with one coach or trainer who leads each session using a speakerphone (i.e., the three staff members are onsite together with the coach/trainer remotely participating) or a multi-line call that links individuals from different locations.   |
| Video-conferencing   |
| Description: Teleconferencing and videoconferencing both allow for questions, interactions, and role-plays, along with observation and feedback. Teleconferencing requires only a telephone with speakerphone or conferencing technology, whereas videoconferencing requires a video camera, microphone, and television monitor – all of which require greater financial and technological resources. However, video cameras can capture facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact, adding another dimension to distance-based learning and practice. Visual images can more easily facilitate role plays, and will also allow for nonverbal cues and behaviors to be incorporated into the coaching of skills and their practice.                                   |
| Web-conferencing   |
| Description: Online or web-based meetings add computers to the use of telephones, video cameras, and web cameras for blended learning. Web-conferencing options allow a trainer or coach to meet with any number of learners in a real-time, collaborative format. Within many web-conferencing software platforms are options to share computer screens alongside video and audio display, allowing a consultant or trainer to share presentation slides or other files with learners while still interacting onscreen via video and online chat features. Another available option in some platforms is the ability to archive web-conferencing sessions for future reference and viewing, which allows an agency to build a library of recordings for others to view. |

| Web courses   |
|---|
| Description: When used efficiently, classroom training and web courses can parallel and complement one another. Web courses or webinars can be provided before or after scheduled classroom training, either preparing learners in advance or making continued learning more readily accessible. When used efficiently, classroom training and web courses can parallel and complement one another. Web courses or webinars can be provided before or after scheduled classroom training, either preparing learners in advance or making continued learning more readily accessible. First-generation web courses were general text-based slides and true-false or multiple choice exams with little interaction, engagement, or feedback. However, newer software has allowed for the development of second-generation web based learning courses that allow for constant interaction and corrective feedback. It is important to note that web courses do a wonderful job of learning transfer, but used alone they cannot build skills. In addition to web-based learning modalities, the use of communities of practice can reinforce and apply continued skills learning. These small groups can even run in tandem with web-based content learning. |

The range of technological adaptation in your own agency impacts openness and ability to use blended learning options as described in the table above. Some management teams easily embrace new technology and blended learning options, while others only seem to trust on-site classroom training (e.g., Bozarth, 2010). Single episodes of classroom training by outside providers cannot be sustained over time to provide the ongoing coaching and feedback that is necessary to build skills and sustain a Motivational Interviewing program initiative.

Empirical comparisons of classroom and distance learning often find that both modalities enjoy similar rates of learning, and both can be equally motivating (e.g., Bernard, et al., 2004; Clark, Bewley, & O’Neil, 2006). While some research shows benefits of distance-learning technology over classroom instruction, and other findings reflect better performance with classroom learning, such discrepancies are often due to differences in instructional design rather than the medium in which information is conveyed (Clark, 1994, 1999; Clark & Mayer, 2007; Mayer, 2005). Anyone can readily recall a session of training that was painful, boring, or held little value. The same can be said for blended learning and distance education. One negative experience is not always reflective of all learning experiences in that modality.

It’s a new technological age for offender systems. The same technologies that allow for more effective tracking and management of offenders can also facilitate implementation and sustainability of Motivational Interviewing initiatives. Progressive implementation teams understand that a few training sessions alone will not result in a competent Motivational Interviewing practice. Creative learning approaches, a continued focus on practice and feedback, and consideration of valuable characteristics of trainers and learners can refresh learning efforts and make Motivational Interviewing a lasting approach in your organization.

## VI. Closing

Finally, I sympathize with correctional management teams who find the requirements of effective integration daunting. While it may seem difficult enough to (a) learn about the steps and progression of implementation science, (b) find the patience and commitment to complete necessary organizational readiness, then (c) disrupt agency operations to convene multiple training sessions,

only to (d) face the further call to provide coaching and feedback—there is no need for despair. Consider the finding that even a modest amount of expert coaching can significantly improve proficiency in Motivational Interviewing. This may involve as few as five or six individual coaching sessions conducted by telephone for 30 minutes each. Your organization can be creative in providing coaching and feedback without further straining already stretched resources, and mileage is gained for improving the practice of an evidence-based approach in any setting.

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