

WORKFORCE
BENCHMARKING
NETWORK

PUTTING DATA TO WORK



NURTURING INQUIRY AND INNOVATION

LESSONS FROM THE
WORKFORCE BENCHMARKING
IMPROVEMENT COLLABORATIVE

NOVEMBER 2013

The Workforce Benchmarking Network

The program improvement work summarized in this brief is one of several initiatives of the **Workforce Benchmarking Network**. The network includes nonprofit organizations, funders, intermediaries and policymakers dedicated to improving results in the workforce development field—by ensuring that quality data about services and outcomes are available and by building the field’s capacity to use that data to create more effective programs and policies.

This particular project was led by two local workforce intermediaries:

Founded in 1981, the **Chicago Jobs Council** is a member-based coalition that, through public policy advocacy, applied research, professional development training and technical assistance, promotes employment and career advancement opportunities for people living in poverty.

Founded in 2004, **Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI)** is a nonprofit organization focused on improving the day-to-day operations of workforce development programs and strengthening the workforce development field. WPTI provides high quality, contextualized professional development and training opportunities as well as consulting services to local workforce systems.

The Workforce Benchmarking Network builds on the earlier work of The Benchmarking Project managed by Public/Private Ventures. National leadership for the network is now provided by **Corporation for a Skilled Workforce**, which partners with government, business and community leaders to connect workers with good jobs, increase business competitiveness and build sustainable communities.



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We are also grateful to the colleagues who provided support and suggestions as we piloted this approach to improving program results. Joslyn Levy, founder and principal of Joslyn Levy Associates, and Jane Taylor, Ed.D., Improvement Advisor, provided invaluable coaching and lessons from their use of the model in the healthcare field. Ellen Johnson and Greg Shirbroun of the Chicago Jobs Council, as well as Greg Holley and Sharon Sewell of Workforce Professionals Training Institute, were co-learners in the process and shared useful insights. Consultants Virginia Hamilton, Amy Landesman, Sheila Maguire and Dee Wallace assisted with early planning efforts.

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Introduction

“How can I produce better results?” is a question that drives most nonprofit organizations.

AT THE HOPE PROGRAM IN BROOKLYN, an employment specialist is pursuing the answer through the seemingly mundane task of entering notes into a database. She has just returned from a site visit with an employer, where she learned that one of the interns HOPE placed there is struggling with tardiness—information that can now be raised in the weekly client meeting where specific participant issues are discussed. HOPE has increased the frequency of visits to internship hosts and improved its tracking of employer feedback, as part of an effort to boost the number of internships that convert into permanent jobs. They’ve also improved the quality of information they are getting about internship sites, which has allowed them to make better matches. Sharing and responding to feedback from internship hosts about what’s going well and what could be better has helped HOPE’s staff fine-tune the program’s attendance policy and strengthen its work readiness curriculum.

AT NATIONAL ABLE NETWORK IN CHICAGO, a staff member is reaching out to applicants who have responded to a recent advertisement for their IT Career Lab training program. As part of the call, she’s asking a set of standard questions the organization has developed to help ensure that applicants have the drive to complete a challenging program and the prior experience (or at least interest) in the IT industry that they will need to benefit from the training. National Able sees this type of screening as key to reducing the number of participants who drop out of the IT program early.

Like other organizations around the country that provide workforce development services for disadvantaged populations, HOPE and National Able are actively grappling with the question of how to improve their results. It is a question driven partly by the desire to serve their participants well—in the face of a labor market that is increasingly inhospitable to low-skilled job seekers. But it’s also driven by the need to be accountable to public and private funders.

In a field that has been outcomes-focused for more than 30 years, it’s commonly expected that programs will be able to report data to funders and other customers about short-term results (such as training completions and credentials gained) and/or longer-term outcomes (like job placements, employment retention and average wages). But with persistent cuts in federal spending and increased scrutiny from all funders as they seek to maximize their return on their investment, organizations like National Able and HOPE feel mounting pressure to demonstrate that their results are getting better and better.

Since 2004, the Workforce Benchmarking Network (formerly The Benchmarking Project) has been helping organizations meet this challenge—by collecting and sharing information on performance and effective practice, forging connections between organizations, and helping them use data to improve their results (see ***The Workforce Benchmarking Network*** text box below).

The Workforce Benchmarking Network

(formerly The Benchmarking Project)

With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and local foundations in New York City and Chicago, the Workforce Benchmarking Network has focused on answering the following questions:

What are “good” results? How do my results compare? A web-based Benchmarking survey of program characteristics and outcomes has amassed data from more than 330 programs around the nation, providing valuable “apples to apples” information about the results produced by programs using different strategies or serving different populations. The 2013 report *Apples to Apples: Making Data Work for Community-Based Workforce Development Programs*¹ summarizes the information collected to date. Participating organizations also receive confidential reports comparing their outcomes to those of other programs with similar characteristics.

What are the drivers of success for programs with higher results? The Benchmarking Network is exploring key characteristics and strategies shared by higher-performing workforce programs. Based on Benchmarking survey data, as well as interviews

with providers and evidence from various research studies, the Network is creating a set of practice guidelines and resources around four key success elements: engaging businesses strategically, developing participants to be a qualified workforce, ensuring funding sustainability and cultivating an “adaptive” organizational culture². Drafts of these guidelines helped inform the program improvement ideas discussed in this brief.

How can we address policy or system issues that hinder using data for improvement? The Benchmarking Network has spotlighted field-wide challenges created by inconsistent definitions of key outcomes, duplicative data entry into multiple reporting systems and varied expectations about the data that are important to collect³. The Network is beginning to address these challenges by engaging funders and providers in New York and Chicago in innovative efforts to align data reporting processes.

With support from local foundations, we have worked particularly closely with providers in Chicago and New York City. Through workshops, peer-learning forums and individual technical assistance, programs in these two cities have begun to convert more of their data into knowledge that is useful for program improvement. They have developed “performance dashboards” to better communicate progress on key success measures to their staff, boards and community partners. And they have identified factors that may be influencing outcomes, initiating the collection of data that can help them understand those factors more fully.

In 2012, a group of New York and Chicago Benchmarking providers sought to “go deeper” by engaging more of their staff in using program data and other information about effective

practice to address specific program challenges. To advise this work, we engaged consultants experienced in a quality improvement approach that has been used for decades in the healthcare field—the Model for Improvement⁴, which is applied widely by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. With their help, 16 workforce organizations set out together to learn the elements of this approach and apply it in their programs over a 9- to 12-month period.

This brief highlights some of the efforts of this “Benchmarking improvement collaborative” and shares important lessons learned throughout the process. We hope the brief proves useful for other workforce organizations that are attempting to improve their outcomes—and that it also yields insights for funders seeking to support such efforts.

The Model for Improvement

Over the last decade, the data collected as part of the Benchmarking Network—and the experience of participating providers—has pointed to the importance of “adaptive capacity” for high-performing workforce organizations.

As described by Carl Sussman, adaptive capacity includes the ability to focus on the rapid external changes and many complex forces that affect program outcomes; connections to networks that enhance an organization’s own information and complement its role; inquisitiveness to continuously seek out new data; and innovation to try new ideas while challenging or improving accepted procedures⁵. These assets allow an organization to respond effectively to a changing external environment—like the labor market—and to make adjustments to their work that ultimately enable them to produce better results.

Given the importance of adaptive capacity, we wanted to find a way to nurture it among interested workforce organizations in Chicago and New York. We turned to the Model for Improvement⁶—one of several quality improvement approaches designed to help organizations make ongoing changes that allow them to better serve their customers and accomplish their mission. While the details of these approaches vary, they share some basic tenets:

- ▶ Strive to better understand customer/client needs;
- ▶ Include staff who are working in the targeted area in generating improvement ideas;
- ▶ Use ideas for changes in practice (“change ideas”) shown to be successful in other organizations, and adapt them to the local setting;

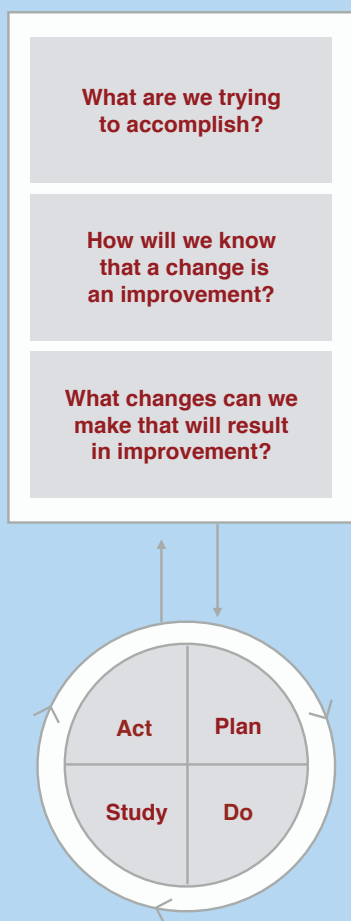
- ▶ Test change ideas using the scientific method⁷; and
- ▶ Use data to understand if improvement is happening.

The Model for Improvement captures these principles in a deliberate, recurring process for identifying goals and measures and testing out various change ideas, as outlined in Figure 1 below.

One of the things that distinguishes quality improvement approaches is that they involve measuring results with the explicit goal of *improving effectiveness*. This is different from measuring results with the goal of accountability or rigorous research, although all three are important. Workforce organizations tend to be most accustomed to using data for accountability, in which case key measures are shared externally, primarily to validate investment or compare results of similar programs. By contrast, measures for improvement are shared internally, for the purposes of improving daily practice.

While accountability requires that all available data on key measures be collected and reported, measuring for improvement entails collecting “just enough” data to test a hunch or refine a change idea. And although longer-term accountability measures can point to areas that need improvement, using data to measure the results of an iterative series of small tests actually helps improvement to happen more quickly⁸.

Figure 1: The Model for Improvement Process



Set Aims:

Improving results requires clear aims or goals. The Aim should be a time-specific and measurable improvement, and should define the specific group of customers who will be involved.

Establish Measures:

This step involves identifying quantitative measures (both short-term process measures and longer-term outcome measures) to determine if a change actually leads to progress toward the Aim.

Select Change Ideas:

Improvement requires change, but not all changes lead to improvement. Select changes that are most likely to accomplish the Aim (based on the team's hunch or hypothesis or from other evidence, where it exists).

Test Changes:

The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is shorthand for testing a change in the work setting, by planning it, trying it out, observing and reflecting on the results, and acting on what is learned. A PDSA cycle starts on a very small scale—for example, testing a change idea with one customer, learning from that interaction and adapting (or abandoning) the idea as needed. Consecutive PDSA cycles, each at an incrementally larger scale, help the team to refine the idea until it's ready for widespread adoption.

Build Synergy with Multiple Change Ideas:

Improving a measure often requires multiple change ideas working in tandem, not just one idea.

Source:

Institute for Healthcare Improvement website:<http://www.ihl.org/knowledge/Pages/HowtoImprove/default.aspx>

The Benchmarking Improvement Collaborative

In May 2012, organizations in Chicago and New York City that had previously participated in Benchmarking Project activities were invited to take part in the Benchmarking improvement collaborative.

Interested organizations provided information on their area of focus, initial improvement goals, and their team's composition and confirmed that their senior leadership was committed to staff participation. A total of 17 teams from the following organizations engaged in the collaborative:⁹

Chicago

- ▶ The Cara Program
- ▶ Chicago House and Social Service Agency
- ▶ i.c. stars
- ▶ Inspiration Corporation
- ▶ Instituto del Progreso Latino
- ▶ Jane Addams Resource Corporation
- ▶ Michael Barlow Center – St. Leonard's Ministries
- ▶ National Able Network

New York City

- ▶ Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation
- ▶ The Doe Fund (two teams)
- ▶ Easter Seals New York
- ▶ FECS
- ▶ Henry Street Settlement
- ▶ The HOPE Program
- ▶ The Osborne Association
- ▶ Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center

Over the next year, these teams engaged in monthly sessions. Convenings of the full collaborative were interspersed with organization-specific meetings and conference calls. Programs said this rhythm kept them accountable for doing follow-up work and helped maintain momentum in the midst of

daily operational challenges. One-on-one calls or meetings often allowed more frontline or leadership staff to participate, and were an opportunity to focus in more depth on specific programmatic challenges.

Throughout the year, each organization focused on one of five broad areas: participant recruitment, participant engagement during the program, participant engagement after the program ends, participant skill gains and employer engagement. Using the Model for Improvement process, the organizations identified specific short-term outcomes within their focus area, such as

- ▶ increasing the number of candidates who are a good fit for a particular training program (recruitment);
- ▶ increasing the number of participants who remain in the program at key junctures (participant engagement); or
- ▶ increasing the number of employers that work with the organization in multiple ways (employer engagement).

They then tested out and refined strategies designed to move the outcome of interest in the right direction. Along the way, the organizations shared valuable support and insight with one another, which many of them said was critical to the initiative's success.

See Appendix A for information about each team's focus area, improvement Aim(s) and results/changes made.

Benchmarking Improvement Collaborative Schedule

Activities occurred in both cities between May 2012 and April 2013, operating on parallel tracks:

Month 1: day-long kickoff meeting – introduction to the Model for Improvement and the proposed adaptation to the workforce development field

Month 2: conference calls – teams indicated their areas of focus and discussed potential improvement goals and measures

Month 3: half-day meeting – review of the Model for Improvement and short presentations by each team on focus area, proposed measures and change ideas

Month 4: conference calls (cross-city) for each focus area – short presentations updated to include descriptions of initial change idea testing

Month 5: half-day meeting – cross-city guest presentations, brainstorm sharing of change ideas in specified programmatic areas (e.g., increasing attendance at post-program events)

Months 6 and 7: individual team phone calls – refinement of short-term measures and review of data compiled to date, coaching on preparing updated short presentations

Month 7: half-day meeting – tutorial in using and interpreting run charts as a tool for showing incremental progress; team presentations

Month 8: email outreach and feedback – request for team next steps

Month 9: site visits with each team – review of improvement process work, reflection on the improvement collaborative, discussion of challenges and lessons

Month 10: half-day meeting including senior leadership – overview of the Model for Improvement and brief descriptions of each team's work, discussion of lessons, challenges and ways to internalize collaborative improvement work

Months 11 and 12: site visits with each team – review of process and next steps, discussion of what is needed to continue improvement work

Team Focus

Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center (New York City)

The Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center (Isaacs Center) is a multiservice organization focused on working with the City's "poor, isolated and disconnected of all ages, genders and backgrounds." The Isaacs Center's Youth Employment and Education Services Program (YES) engages approximately 140 out-of-school youth per year in a five-week intensive job readiness and computer training program, followed by two years of follow-up support services. Isaacs Center staff decided to focus on reversing a recent trend of low graduation rates in this program—dipping below the organization's target of 85 percent—as part of their work in the Benchmarking improvement collaborative. The team brainstormed potential contributors to the trend and conceived the following change ideas:

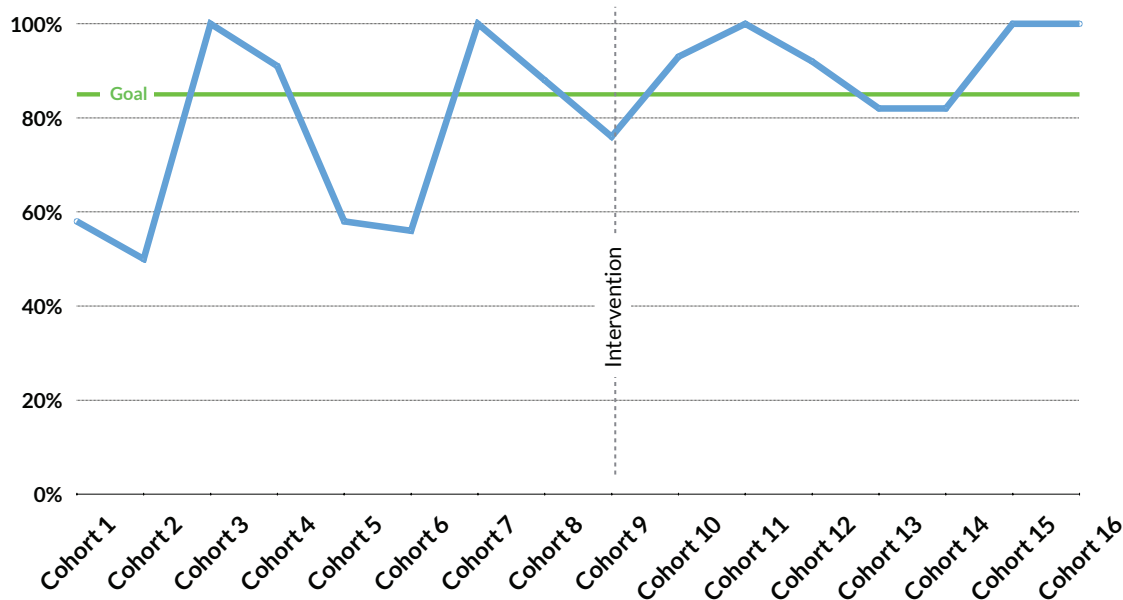
- ▶ Contact participants to ensure attendance at orientation—the final state of the enrollment process—and follow up with those who do not attend;

- ▶ Assign each participant a Social Work intern by the end of Day 2, who will work closely with the participant for the duration of the program;
- ▶ Discuss major concerns/setbacks at weekly staff case meetings and devise/implement next-step plans based on those discussions; and
- ▶ Use Friday afternoon "social time" to strengthen client-client and client-staff relationships.

These changes, which were tested, adapted and implemented over a several-month period, appear to have made a difference in graduation rates for Isaacs Center's YES program. Whereas earlier results fluctuated greatly from cohort to cohort, the program now regularly meets or exceeds its goal of graduating at least 85 percent of enrollees (see Figure 2). Senior leadership has supported the program director's efforts to institutionalize the changes outlined above and plans to apply the improvement process to other programs throughout the agency.

Figure 2: YES Program Graduation Rate

November 2011 through May 2013 (N = 159)



Note: The above is an example of a "run chart", one of the data tools used by the Model for Improvement.

Lessons Learned

The experiences of the organizations in Chicago and New York City suggest a number of lessons for other programs that are working to improve their results. These include lessons about the role of leadership, the composition of the improvement team, and the improvement process itself.

... on the Role of Leadership

1. Senior leadership needs to set the tone by making staff engagement in improvement work an urgent, vital priority.

Nonprofit workforce development organizations juggle numerous priorities. It can be challenging to focus on improvement when so many other issues demand attention. The Benchmarking improvement collaborative was most effective for organizations whose leaders set the tone in the following ways:

- ▶ They made sure that staff knew how the organization was doing on key performance indicators, and they tied the performance improvement work to those targets (e.g., improving graduation rates);
- ▶ They set high expectations for data quality. For example, a vice president at Instituto del Progreso Latino has held meetings for users of their new database software to stress the importance of data being accurate and complete;
- ▶ They regularly made time for reflection on the data as part of staff meetings;
- ▶ They showed a personal interest in the work of improvement teams by sometimes attending meetings;
- ▶ They publicly recognized staff for their efforts;

- ▶ They encouraged staff to be innovative in their thinking and to try out new ideas. As a FECS senior vice president shared, “Nurturing the inquisitive mind is more important over the long term than finding the ‘magic bullet’”

In the absence of senior leadership buy-in to the improvement process, teams experienced difficulty implementing even the simplest change ideas, as they waited for “sign-off” or approval. Conversely, when an organization’s leaders actively supported the collaborative’s work, teams were able to develop, test and refine ideas quickly and successfully.

2. “Driving” the improvement process needs to be a clear part of someone’s job.

In some of the teams, improvement work was driven by an evaluation- or data-focused staff member who had the mandate – and support from senior leadership – to engage their colleagues around using data to inform program improvements. In other organizations, the work was led by key program directors or managers. Regardless of the person’s title, having someone own the process and stay focused on their project’s “Aim” was critical to making progress in the face of day-to-day pressures and the inevitable crises that sometimes arose. By contrast, when it was unclear who was responsible for keeping improvement work on track, it easily fell by the wayside.

Challenges to the Improvement Process

As might be expected with any group of 16 organizations engaged in new work over the course of a year, the level of staff engagement and the subsequent results of their improvement work varied. Challenges familiar to many nonprofit programs sometimes slowed their progress, for example:

- ▶ Technology issues, such as difficulties getting needed reports from existing databases, or challenges with new software;
- ▶ Staff vacancies, which sometimes put improvement plans on hold until new staff were available; and
- ▶ Funding cuts, which sometimes meant that entire strategies had to be redesigned.

3. Manage expectations and celebrate progress often. Improvement work must be seen as an ongoing process, and significant improvement can take a long time to achieve.

Having a clear Aim is key to the process of improvement – what results will change over time? Some organizations' change ideas produced positive results quickly, perhaps because there was an area that hadn't previously received attention—making it “low-hanging fruit.” Inspiration Corporation, for example, saw its rate of contact with program graduates double during the course of the improvement period, when staff focused on making follow-up calls immediately after graduation. In other cases, however, programs zeroed in on areas where they were already performing fairly well. The improvement collaborative was viewed as an opportunity to “raise the bar.”

Whether focusing on a brand new area or one that had already received considerable attention, staff understandably wanted to see results from their work. When improvement was not especially dramatic, staff were sometimes disappointed.

Because it can take time to see a sustained positive trend, leaders should help staff see the benefits of their early work. Just being able to track the data and use it to guide inquiries on program performance is valuable, even if the intended goal has not yet been achieved. Leaders may be able to put results in perspective and highlight progress that's not immediately evident. The Cara Program, for example, looked to historical program data when improvements following the implementation of their change ideas began to level off. This information pointed to cyclical or seasonal ebbs and flows in outcomes. By putting recent data in the context of past program years, the team was able to see that “while there is still a U-shape to the data over the year, the cyclical decline this year—since implementing our change ideas—was not as dramatic as in past years.”

Of course, if data continue to show a negative trend over time, leaders also need to raise questions with staff: “Something about this approach is not working—how can we adjust our strategy? What more do we need to learn? Is it time to revisit our basic assumptions?”

Team Focus

Jane Addams Resource Corporation (Chicago)

The Jane Addams Resource Corporation (JARC) provides supportive services and skills training in the manufacturing sector, along with services designed to help businesses improve their competitiveness. JARC's team came to the Benchmarking improvement collaborative with a goal of engaging its company partners in at least two of the three core sets of services offered – job placement, incumbent worker training, and business services (e.g., connecting manufacturers to the wind energy supply chain, linking local design schools to manufacturers). Key measures JARC planned to monitor included the number of incumbent worker classes scheduled; the number of employers hiring multiple participants; and the auxiliary ways employers became involved (e.g., donating money or goods, volunteering time, or participating on an industry advisory council).

JARC staff tested several change ideas (some of which are documented in Appendix B, Figure 2). One of the change ideas that proved most effective was the use of a formal Client Services

Agreement (CSA), which documents proposed services and costs discussed in a meeting. The CSA gave business services staff a reason to immediately follow up with an employer—to review its contents. Internally, the CSA has provided a useful way to track progress with each employer in a consistent way.

JARC staff also began holding more regular business development team meetings, which helped it simultaneously expand its roster of engaged employer partners and “prune” dead employer leads. JARC's associate director of programs reflected that this more systematic approach to employer engagement means that staff are no longer “thrashing around in the bushes”—which has increased their efficiency.

Since implementing these changes, JARC has seen a three-fold increase in the number of incumbent worker trainings booked. Looking ahead, JARC staff plan to focus on increasing the rate at which company visits result in other “positive outcomes,” such as job placements or new business services.

... on the Team Composition and Environment

4. Involve people with multiple perspectives, including frontline staff.

The organizations that made the most progress in their improvement work were those that engaged a diverse group of staff in thinking about their project Aim. They made sure that both managerial and frontline perspectives were represented, and that both evaluation and operational staff were involved. In several cases, the teams included frontline staff in different roles (e.g., instructors and case managers) and/or staff from different program sites. Whether the organizations were large or small, this diversity of viewpoints was critical, as was the involvement of staff who were actually “doing” the work being discussed. As a leader of the FECS team shared, “At first, it was just the managers working on the improvement process. As soon as we engaged frontline staff in generating change ideas, the buy-in to implementing the changes greatly increased.”

Being included in the improvement process helped frontline staff feel connected to their organization’s larger mission and goals. As a staff member from Cara put it, “I feel more engaged in my role. I’m not just an intake worker. I realize there’s a lot of strategy that goes into it.”

5. Having data on results is important, but not enough. Make sure there’s regular time for team reflection and brainstorming about the data.

It’s not unusual for data reports to be shared with staff, but most of the improvement organizations said that they could do a better job of making time to reflect on the information. When that happened, sometimes there were unexpected insights. In mining its data, Cypress Hills staff discovered that

many of their job placements were in the logistics sector and that those starting salaries were slightly higher than the salaries seen in other industries. This has prompted staff to consider a more sector-based approach to their employer engagement strategy.

In some cases, establishing more regular opportunities for communication became a change idea in and of itself. As JARC’s Associate Program Director commented, “I was not in favor of having any more meetings. But I realized we were all carrying too much information around in our heads. Setting up a regular time to look at our employer spreadsheet forced us to make sure it was current and helped us communicate important information about the stories behind the data.”

6. Create “safe space” to acknowledge what’s not working and explore the reasons why.

The data that improvement teams collected as part of the collaborative provided a good “reality check” on what was working and what was not. For example, when they reviewed intake and participation data, staff from the Michael Barlow Center discovered that only a third of participants were returning for follow-up visits after their initial meeting with their job developer. This revelation catalyzed a series of productive conversations among staff and prompted program changes designed to help job seekers develop more ongoing relationships with the job developer.

A key to having such conversations is the creation of a “safe space” that is sensitive to staff’s potential discomfort about how less-than-ideal results might reflect on them personally. Rather than assigning blame, team leaders made sure that conversations focused on the various factors contributing to the issue and ideas to address those factors. Like the

Michael Barlow Center, the Osborne Association created an environment where staff could talk freely about internal program referral challenges. They even considered planning an internal “failure forum,” where staff at all levels could candidly discuss the lessons gained from failed efforts.

... on the Improvement Process

7. Focus on the “small results” you can easily measure on a frequent basis – but that reasonably contribute to the big outcomes.

Most of the teams ultimately aimed to improve outcomes such as program completion, job placement or job retention. Indeed, the majority of workforce organizations monitor these outcomes quarterly or by program cycle. But these outcomes take time to accomplish, and for improvement purposes it is important to track other kinds of relevant results data. A vice president at i. c. stars explained that “by looking at simple metrics we could collect frequently, we gained a much better feel for what was happening and could address issues more quickly.”

During the initial months of the improvement process, teams worked to hone in on the most useful short-term progress indicators and metrics. Often these data were already being captured for other purposes. For example, some of the improvement teams that were focused on participant engagement made use of daily attendance data. Teams examined attendance patterns or absences sorted by a particular participant characteristic to help inspire change ideas.

8. Make change ideas practical, specific, and doable. “What can you try by next Tuesday?”

There is never enough time, and staff plates are almost always full. In some of the projects, effective change ideas were often “micro interventions” that had to do with improving how a practice was implemented. Henry Street Settlement’s team tested a new script for retention outreach calls by selecting ten graduates, documenting the content and outcome of each call, and making refinements to the script following discussion about how well the original script worked.

In other cases, entirely new activities were tried and refined. Importantly, the Plan-Do-Study-Act approach meant that even a brand new change idea didn’t need to be perfect or totally thought out before programs tried it with a few people. Easter Seals New York developed its improvement work around the launch of a new online career assessment and job search program. When the team faced inevitable software-related delays, being part of the collaborative helped focus the team on “small things we could do to move us in the right direction” like improving their individual employment plan process.

9. The problem isn’t always what you think it is: Keep asking questions with staff and customers.

In several of the improvement collaborative projects, continuing to ask the question “why is that happening?” helped teams get clearer about the root issues they needed to address. The Doe Fund’s Ready, Willing and Able Education team’s persistence helped them identify a longstanding and long-overlooked structural issue: “We thought our low attendance in basic skills classes was primarily disinterest on the

part of our residents, until we also discovered by talking with participants that we'd inadvertently set up schedule conflicts with other mandatory events."

It was also helpful to drill down further on their data to understand who was completing the training, getting jobs, etc.; who wasn't; and what might be different about those groups. The Doe Fund's Advancement team looked at attendance data typically collected for alumni events and learned that graduates of their Pest Control training track were more likely to attend the events than those from other tracks (e.g., culinary or security). This led them to consider a new set of questions and hunches around reasons for low attendance and to generate different sets of change ideas—for example, outreach and marketing strategies—for each training track.

10. Get technology to help wherever possible - but don't let it stand in the way.

A few improvement sites used technology to make implementation of change ideas easier and more

effective. For example, i.c. stars developed a simple process to automatically track when participants sent follow-up emails to businesses. This saved staff time and made data collection much easier. Similarly, Henry Street Settlement staff could flag participants in their database who they were trying to reach for job retention, and staff providing other services (e.g., tax preparation) would see that note in the participant's record.

Several other teams wanted to use technology to better see the results of their change ideas, but discovered that they were unable to get the kind of reports they were looking for from their database. Inspiration Corporation staff began consistently tracking follow-up calls as part of the improvement process; however, they required external support to develop useful reports about these data. In a few other cases, limited staff skills in using technology made engaging them in the improvement process more difficult to do until they could gain more training or practice.

Moving Toward a Culture of Inquiry and Innovation

Initiatives using the Model for Improvement in the healthcare field are often much longer in length and more resource-intensive than was possible for the Benchmarking collaborative. But the relatively brief activities adapted from this model still proved useful.

They helped organizations improve short-term outcomes in several cases and often increased staff engagement around data and results. As a Chicago House manager noted, “The collaborative has helped us focus on the important ‘middle work’ like assessment and work readiness preparation. It has given us new ways to talk about data as a staff.” A number of participating providers now want to apply the process within other program areas, expanding the number of staff involved.

The Benchmarking improvement collaborative has also spurred reflection about what it takes to sustain an organizational culture of inquiry and innovation informed by data. While the lessons in this report provide some clues, they also suggest important questions. For example:

- ▶ How can organizations manage expectations—among staff and funders—and communicate that building internal capacity for improvement is a long-term process?
- ▶ How can they do this work in a “resource tight” environment? How can existing staff forums be better used to focus on key data and program improvement?
- ▶ What creates and sustains the motivation for frontline staff to do this kind of work?
- ▶ What kind of coaching do managers need to build an environment that balances accountability with learning for improvement?

- ▶ What tools might help organizations assess and measure their progress toward creating a robust culture of inquiry?

For intermediaries and funders interested in deepening workforce organizations’ capacity to use data for improvement, the Benchmarking collaborative has reinforced some important insights:

- ▶ **Learning quality improvement concepts is not enough.** Focusing capacity-building activities on specific program results that need to be improved adds relevance and urgency to the learning activities;
- ▶ **Timing matters, but there’s never a perfect time to do this work.** When choosing organizations, pay attention to such factors as staff transitions, new software implementation or other major projects that might compete for attention. But the odds of success are still good if, in spite of these challenges, improvement work can be integrated into existing organizational activities—not as an add-on, but as a fundamental change in how those activities are done;
- ▶ **Directly engage staff at all levels in building improvement capacity, including organization leaders, managers and line staff.** Given the important role that leaders play in this work, more needs to be learned about the most effective ways to keep them informed and engaged, given the many priorities competing for their time;

- ▶ **Provide a mix of cohort-based learning events and more individualized follow-up.** Participants highly valued the sharing of ideas across teams as well as the opportunity for more focused reflection during site visits or one-on-one calls. More needs to be learned about the most effective and cost-efficient mix of these activities, including the role that technology can play;
- ▶ **Create “safe space” within the collaborative as a whole, not just within individual teams.** In both Chicago and New York City, meeting with a regular cohort of peers helped staff feel comfortable sharing struggles and failures. It is notable that funders did not attend the Benchmarking collaborative meetings. Not having them in the room—and agreeing that individual program issues discussed in the collaborative stayed in the collaborative—helped to create an environment that supported honest sharing and out-of-the-box thinking.

Conclusion

As workforce providers and funders continue to ask, “How can we improve results?” the answer often involves a call to use “best practices.”

Indeed, one of the advantages of improvement efforts in the healthcare sector is that there is a rich body of research and other evidence about effective practice, as well as agreed-upon metrics to help healthcare practitioners benchmark their progress.

In workforce development, the current body of knowledge about effective practice is less well defined. The Workforce Benchmarking Network and other national initiatives are focused on identifying practices that contribute to better results for programs and partnerships. An important next step is agreeing on consistent metrics (e.g., attendance rates, employer engagement measures, etc.) that can help organizations track and benchmark their progress and better manage their programs.

But it’s not enough to have information from research and the field about the elements of effective practice. Better results only come from better *implementation* of those core elements in a specific context. Engaging organizations in an approach like the Benchmarking improvement collaborative helps them use data to understand what’s working and what’s not working on the front line. It pushes staff to be inquisitive and innovative—and helps organizations build their capacity to adapt and thrive in a changing environment. This is what is needed—for more organizations across the country—if we hope to achieve better results for job seekers, employers and communities.

Endnotes

1. Miles, M. and S. Woodruff-Bolte. 2013. *Apples to Apples: Making Data Work for Community-Based Workforce Development Programs*. Ann Arbor, MI: Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. Available at: <http://benchmarking.skilledwork.org/?p=1732>
2. For more information, see the Workforce Benchmarking Network website at: <http://benchmarking.skilledwork.org>
3. Miles, M. et al. 2010. *Putting Data to Work: Interim Recommendations from the Benchmarking Project*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. Available at: <http://benchmarking.skilledwork.org/?p=825>
4. Langley, G.J., et al. 2009. *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance (2nd Edition)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Information about the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's use of the Model for Improvement is available at: http://benchmarking.skilledwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Benchmarking_Mainreport_FINAL.pdf
5. Sussman, C. 2003. *Building Adaptive Capacity: The Quest for Improved Organizational Performance*. Prepared for Management Consulting Services, Boston, MA. Available at: http://www.barrfoundation.org/files/Building_Adaptive_Capacity.pdf
Other recent research has also highlighted adaptive capacity and the use of data to support flexibility as critical to the success of programs. See Public/Private Ventures' *Tuning In to Local Labor Markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study*, available at: http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/tuning_in_to_local_labor_markets_findings_from_the_sectoral_employment_impact_study and Chapin Hall's *Inside the Black Box: What Makes Workforce Development Programs Successful?*, available at: <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/inside-black-box-what-makes-workforce-development-programs-successful>.
6. Langley, G.J. et al. 2009.
7. The scientific method involves systematic observation, measurement, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.
8. Similar contrasts exist with using data for rigorous research. Research involves the development and testing of a fixed hypotheses, contrasted with the more flexible, "hunch"-based hypotheses that evolve as learning takes place when measuring for improvement. Research also prioritizes rigorous methods that allow inferences about what caused an observed change; it seeks to eliminate biases and confounding factors (which often means reducing inconsistencies within a program and/or across programs). Improvement efforts are less focused on rigorous evidence and more focused on identifying what "seems to work."
9. Two other organizations in New York started the process but needed to drop out due to staffing and funding issues.

Appendix A

Improvement Collaborative Organizations

This chart lists the organizations that participated in the 2012-2013 Benchmarking improvement collaborative. It summarizes each team's area of focus, the measures the team was focused on improving, and the results or changes the team accomplished.

Benchmarking Project Improvement Process - Participating Organizations and Focus Areas

Improvement Focus Area	Organization	Improvement Aim	Results or Changes Made
PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT	National Able Network (Chicago) www.nationalable.org	Increase number of "good fit" applicants selecting technology training program; increase class completion rate	Increased completion rate; created and documented new screening tool and interview process
	The Osborne Association (NYC) www.osborneny.org	Increase internal cross-program referral rate*	Created "suitability checklist" for case manager use in making referrals between programs
PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT (In Program)	FEGS (NYC) www.fegs.org	Increase pre-internship workshop completion rate for young adults	Improved workshop completion rates; incorporated new curriculum changes
	i.c. stars (Chicago) www.icstars.org	Improve consistency/timeliness of participant communication with internship hosts; increase job orders	Increased job orders; instituted weekly participant follow-up and created email-based tool to measure participants' communication
	Inspiration Corporation (Chicago) www.inspirationcorp.org	Increase number of graduates engaged in a service or contacted at least once per month	Increased engagement rates; improved consistency of participant follow-up and related data collection
	The Cara Program (Chicago) www.thecaraprogram.org	Increase internal retention rate of participants, focusing on attendance at the starts of the first, second and sixth weeks	Saw some improvement in week 2 retention; began standardizing services provided across two program sites
	The Doe Fund – Ready, Willing and Able Team (NYC) www.doe.org	Decrease no call/no-show rate in educational classes; improve email communication skills*	Improved frequency and quality of participant emails; improved communication about absences
PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT (Post-Program)	Henry Street Settlement (NYC) www.henrystreet.org	Decrease number of program graduates with one-year retention "unknown" status	Reduced rate of graduates with "unknown" retention status; engaged alumni as mentors
	The Doe Fund - Advancement Team (NYC) www.doe.org	Increase attendance rate at alumni events	Improved alumni attendance rates among some sub-groups; improved collection of email addresses from current and past participants

* In three cases, progress on the original Improvement Aim was significantly affected by internal events. At Osborne Association the target program for referrals closed midway through the Benchmarking improvement collaborative. At The Doe Fund (Ready, Willing and Able team) the target educational class was temporarily discontinued due to staffing issues. Chicago House progress was slowed by implementation of a new agency database and launch of a major research project.

Appendix A (continued)

Improvement Collaborative Organizations

This chart lists the organizations that participated in the 2012-2013 Benchmarking improvement collaborative. It summarizes each team's area of focus, the measures the team was focused on improving, and the results or changes the team accomplished.

Benchmarking Project Improvement Process - Participating Organizations and Focus Areas

Improvement Focus Area	Organization	Improvement Aim	Results or Changes Made
PARTICIPANT SKILL GAIN	Chicago House (Chicago) www.chicagohouse.org	Increase number of participants using computer lab weekly; increase number of job applications submitted*	Increased staff engagement in identifying important milestone data for new database
	Easter Seals New York (NYC) www.ny.easterseals.com	Increase completion of individual employment plans; increase self-directed job placement rate	Increased completion rate for individual employment plans by using new online assessment tool
	Michael Barlow Center - St. Leonard's Ministries (Chicago)	Increase number of online job applications submitted	Identified trend in one-time only visits to job developer; focused on increasing job seeker/job developer interaction
	Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center (NYC) www.isaacscenter.org	Increase five-week course graduation rate	Improved graduation rates; began applying improvement process to the organization's GED program
EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT	Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (NYC) www.cypresshills.org	Increase number of employers engaged in multiple ways (e.g., internship hosts, job placements, active on Business Advisory Council)	Reached goal for number of employers engaged in multiple ways; increased sharing of employer contacts between job developers
	Instituto del Progreso Latino (Chicago) www.idpl.org	Increase number of complete employer profiles; increase number of employers contacted at desired interval	Increased completed profiles; increased site visits; improved tracking of employer engagement level
	Jane Addams Resource Corporation (Chicago) www.jane-addams.org	Increase number of face-to-face meetings with employers; increase number of companies engaged in at least two of three core services	Increased incumbent worker training requests; improved coordination among business development staff; improved employer follow-up and tracking post-visits
	The HOPE Program (NYC) www.thehopeprogram.org	Increase internship-to-employment conversion rate	Increased conversion rate; developed standardized process for internship host site visits and data collection

* In three cases, progress on the original Improvement Aim was significantly affected by internal events. At Osborne Association the target program for referrals closed midway through the Benchmarking improvement collaborative. At The Doe Fund (Ready, Willing and Able team) the target educational class was temporarily discontinued due to staffing issues. Chicago House progress was slowed by implementation of a new agency database and launch of a major research project.

Appendix B

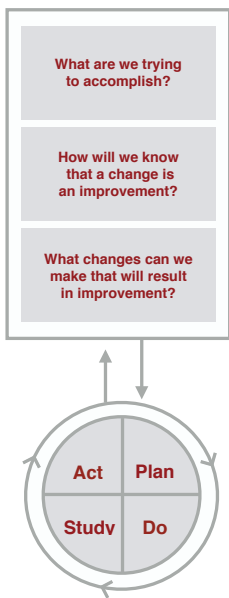
“Pyramid” Worksheet: Multiple Change Ideas

This visual was a useful planning sheet for organization teams as they brainstormed and prioritized “change ideas” that, when implemented together, might lead to an improvement in their target short-term measure.

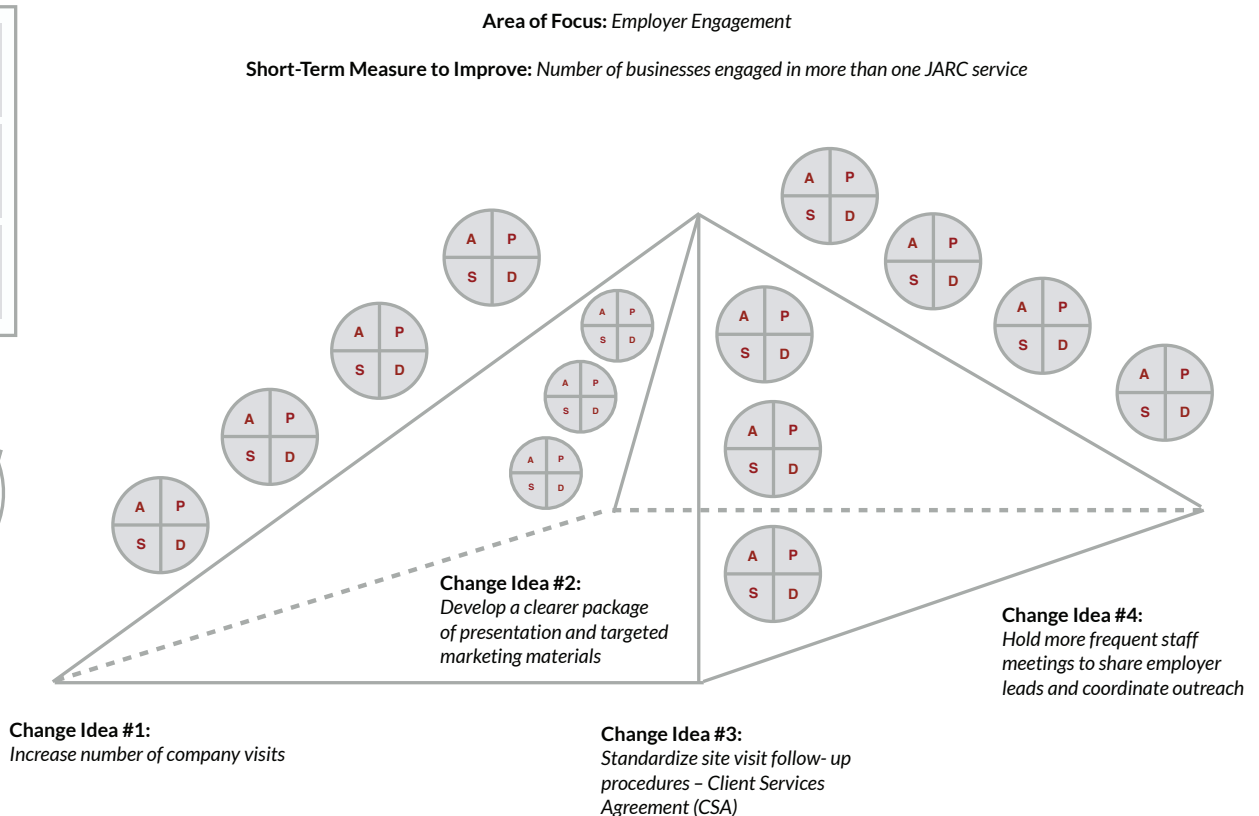
- ▶ The “target measure” is placed at the top of the pyramid.
- ▶ Each of the “ramps” of the pyramid represents one change idea that the team wants to test in an iterative way – starting small – using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) approach.
- ▶ Note: in some cases the change ideas represent a new activity; in other cases they may represent a change in how an activity is done.

A sample Change Idea Pyramid developed by Jane Addams Resource Corporation (see “Team Focus” on page 10) is below, followed by a blank worksheet.

Model for Improvement

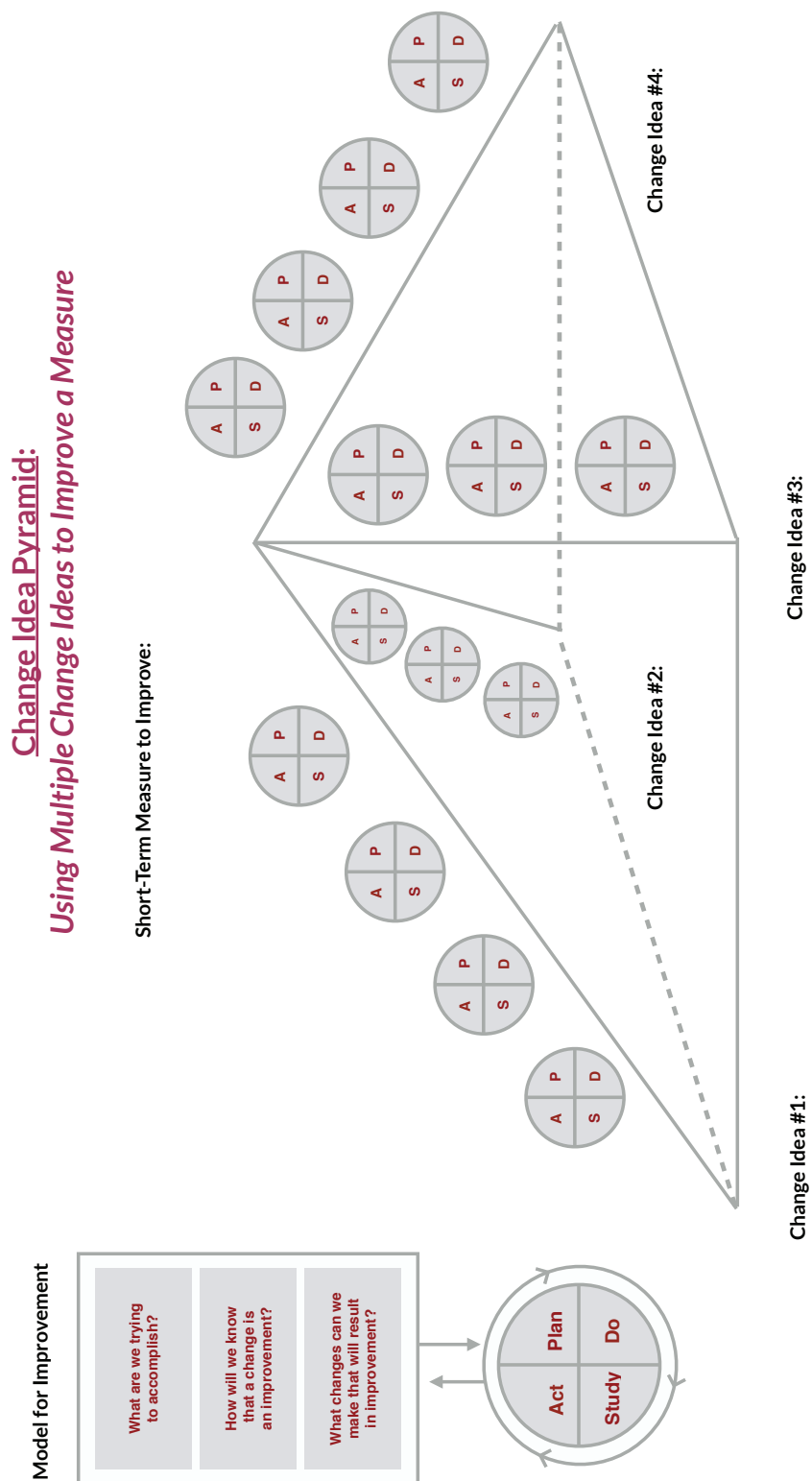


Example: Jane Addams Resource Corporation Change Ideas



Appendix B (continued)

“Pyramid” Worksheet: Multiple Change Ideas



Appendix C

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Worksheet

The questions in this worksheet were useful to teams as they planned the implementation of their change ideas and reflected afterwards on lessons and next steps.

Team name:	Date of test:	Test completion date:
Overall team/project Aim:		
Change idea being tested in this PDSA:		

PLAN:

What is the hunch/hypothesis you are testing?

How will you test the hunch?

What do you predict will happen?

What do you expect as the result?

If this test is successful, what will you do next?

Plan for conducting test & data collection (use space in right-hand side of this form to record observations.)

List the tasks necessary to complete this test (what)	Person responsible (who)	When	Where
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

DO: Test the changes.

Was the test of the change idea carried out as planned? Yes No

What did you observe that was not part of your plan?

STUDY: Reflect on what happened.

What was the “result” of this test of your idea?

Did the results match your predictions? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Compare the result of your test to your previous testing of ideas – was it better? Not better? Why?

What are the lessons?

ACT: Decide to Adopt, Adapt, or Abandon

☐ Adapt: Improve the change and continue testing. Changes to test next:

☐ Adopt: Select changes to implement on a larger scale and develop a plan for implementation and sustainability.

☐ Abandon: Discard this change idea and try a different one.

IF PLAN IS TO ADAPT:

Briefly describe the next test.