STRENGTHENING NONPROFITS:
A Capacity Builder's Resource Library

Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices

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INTRODUCTION

The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provided capacity building grants to expand and strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in their ability to provide social services to low-income individuals. Between 2002 and 2009, CCF awarded 1,277 grants, and the CCF National Resource Center provided training and technical assistance to all CCF grantees. *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* is born out of the expansive set of resources created by the National Resource Center during that time period, to be shared and to continue the legacy of CCF's capacity building work.

Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library contains guidebooks and e-learnings on the following topics:

1. Conducting a Community Assessment
2. Delivering Training and Technical Assistance
3. Designing and Managing a Subaward Program
4. Going Virtual
5. Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices
6. Leading a Nonprofit Organization: Tips and Tools for Executive Directors and Team Leaders
7. Managing Crisis: Risk Management and Crisis Response Planning
8. Managing Public Grants
9. Measuring Outcomes
10. Partnerships: Frameworks for Working Together
11. Sustainability
12. Working with Consultants

Who is the audience for *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library*?

Anyone who is interested in expanding the capacity of nonprofit services in their community – from front–line service providers to executives in large intermediary organizations – will benefit from the information contained in this resource library. The National Resource Center originally developed many of these resources for intermediary organizations, organizations that were granted funds by CCF to build the capacity of the faith-based and community-based organizations (FBCOs) they served. As such, the majority of the resources in *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* support intermediary organizations in their capacity building efforts. However, funders of capacity building programs (Federal program offices and foundations) and the nonprofit community (including FBCOs) at large will also find these resources helpful. In addition, individuals working to build capacity within a program or an organization will be able to use these resources to support their efforts to implement change and make improvements.

The ***Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices*** guidebook will be helpful to any intermediary or coalition interested in sharing knowledge among a group of organizations about effective practices and what works for those organizations.

Who developed the ***Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices*** guidebook?

The guidebook was originally developed by the National Resource Center with assistance from Mark Publow. It was updated in 2010 for the Department of Health and Human Services by the National Resource Center.

OVERVIEW

By reading this particular guidebook, nonprofit organizations will equip themselves with the knowledge and information needed to identify, validate, and promote effective practices that will help improve their organization and the quality of services they provide within their communities.

The process of systematically improving performance by identifying, understanding, and adapting successful practices is often referred to as **benchmarking**. Benchmarking was first utilized extensively in the business sector in such areas as manufacturing, information technology, and healthcare management. Over the past decade, efforts have been increasingly made to encourage the adoption of effective practice methodologies in the nonprofit sector.

As awareness of effective practices has grown, so has the need for the development of a standardized process for benchmarking them. To date, this skill set has resided predominantly in research-based institutions such as universities and policy research institutes. More recently, however, nonprofits and nonprofit intermediary organizations have begun to develop methodologies around the identification and promotion of effective practices. Since these practitioner organizations generally focus on providing direct program services or capacity building activities, they often do not have access to the research skills or other resources that corporate or academic institutions use to identify effective practices. However, nonprofits have a definitive need for accessible, useful processes and tools that can assist them in the benchmarking process.

After reading this guidebook, nonprofit organizations will better understand the key elements required to identify and promote effective practices:

- Understanding the three types of effective practices — best, promising, and innovative
- Identifying existing best, promising, and innovative practices
- Identifying and validating effective practices
- Promoting effective practices

This guidebook will also help organizations answer several key questions:

- Why are effective practices important?
- What are the differences between best practices, promising practices, and innovative practices?
- How do you identify existing practices?
- How do you identify and validate new practices?
- What are some useful tools for teaching others to identify and incorporate these practices?

For the remainder of this guidebook, the terms "practice," "effective practice," and "potential practice" refer to any practice that has yet to be classified as best, promising, or innovative.

What Are Effective Practices?

When identifying effective practices it is important to begin with a clear understanding of what qualifies as a practice. A practice can refer to an activity, strategy, methodology, system, process, technique, tactic, or approach. For example, a youth-serving mentoring organization may discover that utilizing online social networking sites to recruit mentors or electing youth ambassadors to sit on the organization's board of directors are both effective practices.

Definitions and standards around what constitutes an effective practice vary throughout the nonprofit sector. Different nonprofit organizations use different criteria to identify and classify effective practices. This is also true across sectors of the corporate world—different definitions are used within the business arena and the healthcare industry, for example.

In addition to a variety of criteria, there is also limited agreement on the terms used to refer to an effective practice. But regardless of the terminology, it is important that a practice has clearly defined parameters that can be assessed for effectiveness and compared against similar practices.

For the purposes of this guidebook, it is useful to reference the following definitions:

- **Effective practice** — a general term used to refer to best, promising, and innovative practices as a whole. This term may also refer to a practice that has yet to be classified as best, promising, or innovative through a validation process.
- **Best practice** — a method or technique that has been proven to help organizations reach high levels of efficiency or effectiveness and produce successful outcomes. Best practices are evidence-based and proven effective through objective and comprehensive research and evaluation.
- **Promising practice** — a method or technique that has been shown to work effectively and produce successful outcomes. Promising practices are supported, to some degree, by subjective data (e.g., interviews and anecdotal reports from the individuals implementing the practice) and objective data (e.g., feedback from subject matter experts and the results of external audits). However, promising practices are not validated through the same rigorous research and evaluation as best practices.
- **Innovative practice** — a method, technique, or activity that has worked within one organization and shows promise during its early stages for becoming a promising or best practice with long-term, sustainable impact. Innovative practices must have some objective basis for claiming effectiveness and must have the potential for replication among other organizations.

The following chart provides a comparison of the criteria characterizing each type of effective practice:

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	▪ Proven effectiveness in addressing a common problem ▪ Proven effectiveness in more than one organization and in more than one context ▪ Replication on a broad scale ▪ Conclusive data from comparison to objective benchmarks, with positive results ▪ Conclusive data from a comprehensive and objective evaluation by an external, qualified source (most often an academic institution or individual with the appropriate academic credentials)
PROMISING PRACTICE	▪ Effectiveness in addressing a common problem ▪ Effectiveness in more than one organization and in more than one context ▪ Replication on a limited scale ▪ Supporting data from comparison to objective benchmarks, with positive results ▪ Supporting data from an internal assessment or external evaluation
INNOVATIVE PRACTICE	▪ Suggested effectiveness in addressing a common problem ▪ Successful use in one organization and context ▪ Potential for replication ▪ Limited supporting data from comparison to objective benchmarks, with positive results ▪ Limited supporting data from internal assessment

Differentiating between best and promising practices acknowledges that much of the work done by nonprofit practitioners does not and realistically cannot pass the high standard of research needed to be classified as a best practice due to resource limitations in staff time and organizational finances.

As a result, the remainder of this guidebook will focus on promising practices, with the intention that the knowledge and tools provided here will enable nonprofit organizations to move toward a higher degree of programmatic and organizational excellence through the identification and incorporation of promising practices. For the purposes of this guidebook, a practice qualifies as "promising" when it meets the following criteria:

- Addresses a common problem experienced by a broad spectrum of organizations
- Works effectively to address the problem in more than one organizational setting and more than one context
- Has shown replicability at least on a limited scale
- Compares positively to data gathered from other organizations and research studies of other practices addressing the same problem
- Shows supporting data from internal assessments or external evaluations

Why Identify Effective Practices?

It is important to understand how the identification and implementation of effective practices can impact an organization's success. Effective practices can provide nonprofit organizations with significant, long-term benefits including, but not limited to, the following:

- Improved quality of services offered to clients
- Increased cost savings resulting from increased productivity and efficiency
- Increased quantity of services offered to clients
- Improved use of resources by avoiding "reinventing the wheel"
- Identification and replacement of poor practices with proven strategies and programs
- Increased funding from public and private funders interested in supporting programs and strategies based on a proven track record of success
- Increased performance from management and staff

Potential Practice Areas

Another factor to keep in mind is that for the purposes of nonprofit, social service organizations, effective practices will either be *programmatic* or *organizational* in nature.

Programmatic practices refer to the methods or activities that an organization uses in providing some type of service. Areas for best practice use within the programmatic area can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Needs assessment
- Program design

- Work plans
- Project management
- Information or reporting systems
- Community organizing
- Volunteer recruitment
- Evaluation
- Context-specific processes (i.e., practices that apply to organizations that serve certain populations or address a specific set of needs)

Organizational practices refer to the methods or activities that, when implemented, impact the organization's ability to implement and manage programs. Organizational practices may address some of the following topics:

- Governance
- Board development
- Human resources management
- Financial management
- Grant acquisition
- Grant management
- Strategic planning
- Partnerships and collaborations
- Outcomes and quality improvement
- Informational technology management
- Fundraising
- Marketing

A majority of the topics addressed through programmatic and organizational practices are general and can apply broadly to most nonprofit organizations regardless of the sector they serve.

Identifying Effective Practices

There are four general steps that a nonprofit organization can take as it begins the process of identifying and incorporating effective practices into its operations.

1. Identify need areas — In order to effectively build capacity, it is vital for you to identify the specific needs of your organization as well as the needs of your clients and the community you serve. This step involves not only considering immediate needs, but also anticipating future needs.
2. Identify existing practices — Nonprofit organizations may find that they can easily identify existing practices that peer organizations have implemented and validated as effective for addressing organizational needs. The primary way to identify an existing practice is to conduct thorough research into those practices that have been identified and validated by other social service organizations and academics.

3. Identify and validate new practices — When effective practices first emerge, they have yet to undergo the validation process necessary to qualify as a best, promising, or innovative practice. As a nonprofit practitioner dedicated to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the services you provide, it is your responsibility to identify, document, and validate these practices.
4. Implement and promote effective practices — The end goal in identifying and implementing effective practices is to overcome needs in order to improve organizational performance. To meet this goal, nonprofit organizations must take a proactive stance in promoting their practice findings and educating their staff on how these practices will impact operations.

IDENTIFYING PRACTICE NEEDS

In order to effectively build capacity as a nonprofit organization, it is vital to identify the specific needs and to target the promotion of effective practices to meet these needs. To do this, you will need to both identify and prioritize the areas of needs that impact your organization.

Identifying Programmatic Needs

Conducting regular needs assessments within your community or client base can be a vital step in the larger capacity building process and the identification of programmatic areas in need of improvement. Thorough needs assessments can help determine your clients' areas of need for effective practice identification and promotion.

When assessing client needs, you will want to consider both current needs and potential future needs. Inquire as to what challenges and obstacles your clients currently face, as well as the challenges they anticipate facing in the future.

Some nonprofit organizations may find the use of surveys and conference calls instrumental to the needs assessment process, as these methods empower the organization to collect greater amounts of client feedback. Regardless as to whether needs assessments are completed over the phone, in person, or online, your organization should ensure that the line of questioning and terminology is consistent.

After you have successfully surveyed your community or client base, analyze the results of the assessment and look for topical trends in areas of need. For example, consider the needs identified by your clients and how they relate to your organization's mission and vision for the future, and then identify the need areas that you can effectively address through the services you provide. You may find that the needs assessment process identifies multiple areas of need. Be sure to prioritize these needs and focus on those areas that are most urgent to your client and that you feel can be effectively addressed through the identification of effective practices.

Although the process of conducting a needs assessment is quite simple, the results are often very telling and can provide your organization with important information about the needs of the community. Conducting needs assessments on a regular, consistent basis will provide your organization with invaluable insight into the strategic direction you must head to remain a leading service provider in your area.

Identifying Organizational Needs

At times, programmatic needs may help dictate larger organizational needs. For example, if your client population anticipates needing new services, this may have a ripple effect throughout your organization.

Expanding to a new service area may require your nonprofit organization to acquire new grants or increase fundraising or marketing efforts.

In other instances, you may need to take a more proactive approach to identifying organizational needs. Survey program leadership and stakeholders to identify potential strategic needs and survey all staff to identify what processes and systems would benefit from improvement.

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

After you have identified areas of need for your clients and community, you will begin to benchmark potential practices to address these need areas. This is accomplished in one of two ways:

1. Identify *existing* practices that have already been validated to meet the criteria of a best, promising, or innovative practice and that meet the needs of your clients and community.
2. Identify and validate *new* best, promising, or innovative practices that meet the needs of your clients and community.

You may find yourself using a combination of both of these approaches—identifying existing practices where possible and identifying new practices where needed to fill in the gaps in knowledge and practice. Let's take a closer look at each of these options.

Identifying Existing Practices

There are several starting points for you to begin the process of conducting research to identify potential practices:

1. Reference other volumes within the *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* series. Each of the guidebooks in the series provides detailed information and resources regarding a key area of capacity building. This is a great place to begin the process of identifying existing practices.
2. Utilize the articles, resources, and websites included in Appendix A of this guidebook to search for existing practices in a certain dimension or sector.
3. Network with other nonprofit organizations, coalitions, and academic institutions to determine the practices they have identified as successful. Suggested organizations and networks in which to identify effective practices are listed below. When selecting a source, make certain to exercise due diligence and ensure that the source is using sound processes and criteria to select and evaluate practices.

    - National and local foundations
    - Regional associations of grant makers
    - State and Federal grant programs
    - Universities and academia
    - National and local think tanks and research institutes
    - United Way chapters
    - Corporate giving programs
    - National policy-maker associations such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors or the National Governors Association

- Faith-based networks and associations such as the Christian Community Development Association or the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability
- State and national nonprofit associations

4. Search for existing best practices via online databases that house practice descriptions. Some sample sources are included in Appendix A.

Validating Existing Practices

Due to the wide range of definitions and criteria applied to effective practices among the social service sector, it is important to carefully assess the validity of the practices that are identified through research. One way to do this is by asking several key questions:

- What process was used to select this practice?
- What criteria were used to measure the success of this practice?
- Was the practice compared against relative objective data with positive results, or did it appear to have been primarily compared against subjective data?
- Was the practice tested in multiple settings for replicability and adaptability?
- Was the practice nominated by one person or organization, or by a number of organizations or individuals?
- Is there enough information included in the description of the practice to enable implementation or adaptation?
- Does the source of the best practice appear to be a valid resource for identifying best practices?
- Is the source transparent in terms of the process and criteria used to select best practices?
- How long has the practice been in implementation?
- What evidence exists to support the practice's effectiveness?

Identifying and Validating New Practices

Nonprofit organizations are on the front lines where new practices take root. It is therefore important that all staff members are aware of the areas in which the organization is striving to benchmark effective practices.

There are three key steps involved in the process of identifying and validating a new best practice: 1) unearthing effective practices; 2) describing and documenting effective practices; and 3) validating and classifying practices through assessments and review.

Step One: Unearth Effective Practices

For those nonprofits that need or want to identify and validate new practices, the primary place to look is within your own organization or among peer networks of nonprofit organizations that serve a similar purpose and population. A nonprofit may self-identify a potential practice as an effective way to meet client or organizational needs, or your organization may observe an activity or method in practice that you believe will help close the gap in a need area.

Large nonprofit organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters or Boys and Girls Clubs of America have hundreds of thousands of program sites throughout the country to draw from and can easily identify effective practices that meet common needs and are easily transferable from one site to another. However, smaller nonprofit organizations will likely have to turn to peer organizations to identify and observe "what works" in meeting specific need areas.

Whether you discover effective practices internally (within your own organization) or externally (from a peer organization), you should strive to look for practices that are **evidence-based**, showing measurable impact in the area being benchmarked.

Step Two: Describe and Document Effective Practices

Once a practice has been identified and flagged for follow-up, the next step is to describe and document the practice. The purpose of documenting the practice is to provide a detailed description of the practice and its success in addressing the targeted problem. Documenting a practice includes collecting information that can provide a basis for validation.

When documenting a practice, consider the following components:

- What problem or challenge does the practice address?
- In what contexts has the practice been successful?
- How long has the practice been in implementation?
- What evidence is there of the practices' success?
- What outcomes or impacts has the practice helped achieve?

Methods for Documenting an Effective Practice

For many nonprofit organizations, the documentation process will be a new and more rigorous type of description process than they are used to. One of the best methodologies for documenting an effective practice is to conduct either a programmatic or an organizational review, depending on the practice type. While different individuals with varying skill sets are involved in each type of review, the process is largely the same for both. Both types draw predominantly on subjective data sources and are intended to do the following:

- Identify the critical elements that are inherent to the practice.
- Capture procedural information supporting each critical element.
- Identify the tools, processes, and systems that support the practice.

Here is an example of steps that could be taken in conducting a programmatic or organizational review:

- *Identify a review team* — The review team is compromised of individuals from your organization and may also include a limited number of peer reviewers from other nonprofits. The key to a strong review team is ensuring that the individuals on the team have the proper skill set and expertise to review the practice at hand.
- *Create a standardized list of review questions* — This list of questions can be sent in advance to those individuals who are involved in the review of a potential practice. These questions provide an outline of the types of information and source documents needed to conduct the review so that your organization can gather the appropriate staff and resources in advance.

- *Conduct the review* — The review team convenes in a collaborative "meeting of the minds" to try to identify the core elements of the potential practice. The programmatic or organizational review can include an analysis of any source documents, policy and procedural manuals, etc., that the organization has on hand. The review team should also be prepared to create documentation where none currently exists. For example, the team may need to document the basic process flow of practice in terms of key steps, or it may need to document procedural guidelines or policies that have only previously been implied or assumed.

A vital part of the review process involves identifying and documenting knowledge about the potential practice. In many cases, this knowledge may be ingrained in staff yet not comprehensively documented within the organization's records. Due to this possibility, a key task of the review team is to tease out any "embedded" knowledge and make it explicit through documentation.

- *Analyze the review findings* — This critical step in the review process focuses on identifying the key elements of the practice and determining which elements are *context-specific* and which are *replicable*. Context-specific elements are those pieces of original methodology that work only in the specific context of the organization where they originated and were not intended for public distribution or replication. Replicable elements are those pieces of the methodology that have demonstrated their effectiveness in more than one context or location and can therefore be replicated on a wider basis. While the review team will want to document both context-specific and replicable elements, the latter will be of most interest for use as a practice.
- *Finalize documentation of the review findings and prepare for validation* — Following the programmatic/organizational review, the review team should formally document the findings based on the information from source documentation and interviews with organizational staff. At this point, the practice is ready to enter into the validation process.

Step Three: Validate and Classify Practices through Assessments and Review

The validation process consists of analyzing the documentation and classifying the practice as either a best practice, a promising practice, or an innovative practice. A thorough validation process involves the review of both *subjective* and *objective* data points.

Subjective data is gathered from internal reviews, assessments, and feedback mechanisms regarding the success of the practice and is often more autobiographical or qualitative in nature. Sources for obtaining subjective data can include management and staff; customers/beneficiaries; internal auditors; reports from on-the-job experience; and peers.

Objective data, on the other hand, is gathered from objective sources both internal and external to the organization that can provide an objective basis for comparison of the success of the practice through like-kind analysis. Sources for obtaining objective data can include subject matter experts; external auditors; consultants; research evidence; and independent evaluations.

There are two methods of assessment that an intermediary can use to verify and classify practices — a *comparative review* or a *peer review*. While both are valid standalone options, a combination of some degree of each method will yield the most useful results when working with practitioner organizations.

In identifying which method or combination of methods may be the best fit for your organization, you may want to conduct some preliminary research to determine what measures are available or what standards or guidelines exist to help qualify the practice.

Comparative Review

A comparative review draws primarily on objective data sources to compare the findings produced in the programmatic or organizational review to similar best practices of other organizations. The purpose of a comparative review is to validate the results of the programmatic or organizational review through comparison to data gathered from sources external to the organization. The following is a listing of possible sources for finding comparative data:

- *National, regional, or local benchmark data* — This type of data is most often found in program or organizational case studies conducted by external groups interested in assessing the scope of a problem and identifying those programs, activities, or strategies that have proven most successful in solving the problem.
- *Case studies of organizational performance* — This type of data can be drawn from the organization that initially documented the practice or from other social service organizations working in a similar geographical location or sector.
- *Comparative/competitive market analysis* — Data collected through market analysis provides information about the external context in which the practice has been functioning and can be particularly useful when evaluating the practice's potential for replication.
- *Academic research* — This source provides one of the most rigorous types of comparative data. You will want to look for studies conducted in the same geographic areas or around the same sector of activity as the practice being validated. Universities, think tanks, and other academic institutions are great sources for this type of data. Many of the larger social service organizations may already have on file reports of past or current academic research conducted on certain programs or practices.

Peer Review

A peer review draws on the judgment of peers and other practitioner organizations to analyze and affirm the findings of the programmatic or organizational review of the practice. This is accomplished through the presentation of documented review findings to a number of peers (individuals and organizations) to determine if the findings "hold up" and meet with the general consensus of the practitioner community. The goal is to determine if there is agreement among practitioners that the practice qualifies as either a best or promising practice.

The peer review is a critical step in the assessment process in terms of building organizational ownership for the practice, as a practice that has received consensus among a nonprofit community of peers is far more likely to be embraced and incorporated into organizational operations.

Review Strengths and Limitations

The following table provides an overview of the strengths and corresponding limitations of the two types of assessments and can be useful in determining which type or combination of types of assessment are most appropriate for validating a particular practice.

TYPE OF ASSESSMENT	STRENGTHS	LIMITATIONS
COMPARATIVE REVIEW	1. Based on objective data. 2. Avoids the influence of personality or relationships in the assessment process. 3. Provides a new lens for viewing the practice, revealing previously unnoticed aspects of effectiveness. It can also depersonalize the results, making it easier to adapt new attitudes toward or understanding of the practice.	1. It can be difficult to obtain complete "apples to apples" comparative data. 2. Limits the ability to take into account the qualitative aspects of effectiveness that cannot readily be measured. 3. Reduces the practice to a number or set of numbers that for social service and community development organizations often leaves out critical dimensions of community participation and personal life change that are vital concerns to nonprofits.
PEER REVIEW	1. Provides immediate feedback from other practitioners engaged in similar programs or efforts. 2. Through the process of direct involvement in the selection of practices, practitioners build a sense of ownership and therefore increase their receptivity toward adopting practices and making organizational change.	1. Peers can often be only generally aware of the practices of other organizations and can lack the in-depth understanding needed to render sound judgment. 2. Individual bias and organizational self-interest sometimes make it difficult for practitioners to render objective judgment or to willingly admit that other organizations have practices that their organization may need to adopt.

Once the practice has undergone the documentation and validation processes, the organization assigns the appropriate determination — best practice, promising practice, or innovative practice.

Within the nonprofit sector, practices will often be classified as promising or innovative due to the limited availability of evaluation data and quantifiable results. However, nonprofit organizations should consistently evaluate the effectiveness of practices implemented and reevaluate their classification. When validating a practice, consider what data points and indicators will prove that the practice is successful and effective. Track these data points and strive to identify evidence-based practices that draw on concrete performance measures.

Formal Evaluation: The Next Level

For organizations that want to try to validate a practice with the rigor usually reserved for corporate or academic settings, a formal evaluation or research component is the next step. A formal evaluation is essential to making the claim that a practice is evidence-based and validated through research. Formal evaluations are most often conducted by individuals or organizations with a combination of strong research capabilities and subject matter knowledge (e.g., academic institutions or private consulting businesses). For many nonprofit organizations, formal evaluations to validate practices are not feasible, as the process requires extensive time and resources.

Large nonprofits that are striving to set the benchmark and remain on the cutting edge in their service area may find that a formal evaluation of practices is worth the investment. While there are a number of advantages to conducting a formal evaluation and reaching the research-validated best practice level, this is not necessary for all nonprofit organizations.

PROMOTING EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

There are many ways in which nonprofits can promote effective practices within their organizations and the larger community.

It is critical to note the difference between communicating about effective practices and actually ensuring that your organization is prepared to incorporate a practice into its processes and structures. *Internal promotion* of practices is therefore a vital step towards implementation.

Another option for the promotion of effective practices is to share your findings with other nonprofit organizations through *peer-to-peer learning* experiences. The provision of peer-to-peer learning experiences can help establish a collaborative environment where nonprofits collectively strive toward common goals and consistently raise the bar and improve the quality and effectiveness of the services they provide.

Internal Promotion

Internal promotion is essential to the successful implementation of an effective practice. How you promote the practice and prepare your staff for implementation will depend on the size and culture of your organization as well as the complexity of the practice being introduced. Consider the following questions as you begin to conceptualize how you will internally promote a practice:

- *Who will be impacted by this practice?*
  If only a small portion of your staff is impacted by a practice, you may decide that a simple memo to publicize the new practice and the new process will suffice.
- *How does the new practice deviate from our current processes and procedures?*
  If the practice has the potential to impact a large portion of your staff and marks a significant difference from current operations, you may find it more fitting to hold a training event convening all staff in a workshop environment to discuss the change and brainstorm methods for successful implementation.
- *How does our staff react to change?*
  If the practice marks a significant deviation from "business as usual" and your staff are historically averse to change, consider contracting with an outside consultant or subject matter expert who can knowledgably speak about the benefits of the practice and how its implementation will positively impact the organization and the clients you serve. In some instances, your organization may also find it useful to develop a change management plan that helps your staff adjust to the new processes and procedures.

After formally promoting and implementing the practice, you should prepare to evaluate your organization's success in implementing the new process or activity. The time frame for evaluating the practice's effectiveness will depend on the time needed to incorporate the practice and the duration of time that needs to pass before results can be observed.

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Nonprofit organizations may also decide to promote the best or promising practice among their peer networks. In this way, nonprofits can communicate with one another to share effective practices and provide peer support in replicating or adapting practices at other organizations.

Peer-to-peer learning is generally a low-cost and low-effort way to share effective practices that yield high value within the nonprofit community. By creating a "clearinghouse" for effective practices, nonprofit organizations can function as facilitators or organizers, as well as sources of support for collaborations that promote learning and sharing among nonprofits.

Nonprofit organizations can promote peer-to-peer learning in a number of ways. The following list provides several examples but is by no means comprehensive.

1. **Searchable database** — One way to enable peer-to-peer learning is to create a searchable online database where nonprofits can virtually share effective practices with their peers. To host an effective online database, ensure that posted practices meet a minimum standard of criteria; that practices maintain a recognized validation process; and that the database is searchable by sector, area of programmatic activity, and organizational operations.
2. **Listservs** — A listserv is an e-mail list that enables members to send messages to one another. A public listserv allows anyone on the public list to initiate communication with someone else on the list. You can host a listserv that lets nonprofits communicate with one another regarding effective practices and their adaptation, replication, and implementation.
3. **Face-to-face peer learning** — There are many ways for nonprofits to facilitate face-to-face learning events within their communities. An organization might consider hosting peer learning groups in which participants share ideas and experiences related to best or promising practices. Another option is to develop a team of nonprofit organizational representatives who have a vested interest in designing creative ways for sharing effective practices.

SUMMARY

In order to remain competitive and consistently improve the quality and effectiveness of the services provided to their clients, nonprofit organizations must make a concerted effort to continually identify and implement effective practices.

1. As you begin identifying practices, involve your staff as much as possible at each step throughout the process. Involving staff early on helps build ownership and organizational acceptance of the process and ensures that, when it comes time to incorporate these practices into organizational processes and structures, your staff will already have a vested interest in the practices and be more accepting of change.
2. For the purposes of this guidebook, a distinction has been drawn between best practices, promising practices, and innovative practices. Best practices are supported by subjective and objective data sources and are proven to work effectively and produce successful outcomes. More often than not, nonprofit organizations will identify promising practices or innovative practices, as a significant investment of time and resources is often required to classify a best practice.
3. As you begin to consider areas of need and processes that would benefit from the implementation of effective practices, remember that practices may be either organizational (dealing with internal processes that help support your organization) or programmatic (relating to the client-facing services you provide).

4. When identifying effective practices, you may decide to identify existing practices that have already been validated according to sound criteria and that meet the needs of your organization, or you may decide to identify and validate new practices. Identifying a combination of both existing practices and new practices may also provide your organization with a comprehensive set of practices to address need areas.
5. Whether you identify existing or new practices, the process of validation and practice classification is vital. In order to be considered a promising practice, a practice must meet certain criteria, including:
   - Effectiveness in addressing a common problem
   - Effectiveness in more than one organization and in more than one context
   - Replication on a limited scale
   - Supporting data from comparison to objective benchmarks with positive results
   - Supporting data from an internal assessment or external evaluation

   A practice that does not meet these criteria may be considered a promising practice or an innovative practice.
6. All types of practices contain two different types of elements: context-specific elements that relate to the specific context of the originating organization, and replicable elements that are more general and apply to a broader scale of organizations. In identifying which elements of the practice are context-specific and which are replicable, an organization begins to analyze how the practice will "fit" within its overall organizational culture and procedures.
7. Though a practice may have gone through the identification process and been validated as a best or promising practice, keep in mind that not all practices work for all organizations. Consider the organizational climate and needs of your organization and select practices that will have the greatest impact.
8. Once effective practices have been identified, you will likely want to develop a plan to promote these practices internally, with your own staff, and externally, with like-minded nonprofit organizations. Thorough training involving both internal staff and peers can help generate acceptance for the practice and create a culture of collaboration and learning.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Resources and References

Publications

CityNet, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. *Guidelines for Transferring Effective Practices: A Practical Manual for South-South Cooperation*. Bangkok, Thailand: Mitrnara Printing, 1998.

Discusses the principles involved in transferring effective practices and provides helpful charts, illustrations, and lists.

Saul, Jason. *Benchmarking for Nonprofits: How to Measure, Manage, and Improve Performance*. Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2004.

Guides nonprofit organizations through the detailed process of identifying, reviewing, and implementing practices to improve organizational performance.

Keehley, Patricia and Neil N. Abercrombie. *Benchmarking in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors: Best Practices for Achieving Performance Breakthroughs*, 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008.

Provides nonprofits with insights into two different methodologies that organizations can use to draw on solution-driven methodologies and identify promising practices.

Online Resources

Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (*CASAT)*

The CASAT website offers information on best practice identification and incorporation as well as a searchable database of best practices.

The Center for What Works

A nonprofit organization that aims to help social service organizations enhance their performance measurement processes, benchmark results, and strive for improved effectiveness. Members of the Center can access a number of resources, including e-learning lessons, toolkits, recorded webcasts, and case studies.

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) Resource Center

Maintained by ETR Associates, the CNCS Resource Center convenes representatives from different CNCS programs and provides a forum in which to share effective practices. Visitors can search the Resource Center's database to identify effective practices for national and community service programs.

Faith & Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN)

An initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts focused on building capacity among faith-based organizations delivering social services in urban communities. The centerpiece of the FASTEN initiative is a website showcasing best practices.

National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP)

This service of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) includes a searchable database of programs and interventions that are proven to help prevent and treat mental health and substance abuse disorders. The website also details SAMHSA's review process and includes links to more than 150 effective and promising programs in implementation.

Nonprofit Good Practice Guide

This searchable online database, maintained by the Nonprofit Leadership Institute at Grand Valley State University's Johnson Center for Philanthropy, was created in 2002 to capture, organize, disseminate, and promote knowledge-based decisions in the nonprofit sector.

Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet)

As part of the National Youth Employment Coalition, PEPNet is one of the country's premier resources on what works in youth development and employment. The PEPNet website offers an online index to effective practices featuring more than 500 specific practices identified from PEPNet awardees.

Promising Practices Network (PPN)

Operated by the RAND Corporation, PPN offers summaries of programs and practices that work to improve the lives of children, families, and communities.

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV)

P/PV is an action-based research, public policy, and program development organization. As a national nonprofit with offices located in Philadelphia, New York City, and Oakland, CA, P/PV works to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs, and community initiatives, especially as they affect youth and young adults. P/PV also works to identify effective practices and assist in the distribution and replication of these practices among social service programs and agencies.

APPENDIX B

Glossary

Benchmarking — The process of systematically improving performance by identifying, understanding, and adapting successful practices.

Best practice — A program, activity, or strategy that has the highest degree of proven effectiveness, supported by objective and comprehensive research and evaluation.

Capacity building — Capacity, very simply, is the ability to perform or produce. Therefore, to build the capacity of an organization, you do something that increases its ability to perform or produce. As a result of your capacity building activities, the nonprofit organization can accomplish more than it could before.

Effective practice — A general term used to refer to best, promising, and innovative practices as a whole. The term may also refer to a practice that has yet to be classified as best, promising, or innovative through a validation process.

Evidence-based practice — A practice that has been proven statistically effective in improving program outcomes.

Innovative practice — A program, activity, or strategy that has worked within one organization and has shown promise during its early stages for becoming a promising or best practice with long-term, sustainable impact.

Practice — A program, activity, or strategy used by an organization that has clearly defined parameters that can be assessed for effectiveness and compared against other similar practices.

Promising practice — A method or technique that works effectively, produces successful outcomes, and is supported, to some degree, by subjective and objective data sources.

Validation — The process of conducting a comparative assessment using objective and subjective data to evaluate the effectiveness of a practice in solving a targeted problem.

APPENDIX C

Checklist for Identifying Effective Practices

❒ **Task #1: Identify practice needs among clients and within your organization.**

❒ **Task #2: Identify existing practices.**

Conduct research to identify existing practices among social service organizations and academics.

- Reference other volumes within the *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* series.
- Utilize the articles, websites, and resources included in Appendix A.
- Network with other nonprofit organizations, social service agencies, and academic institutions to identify practices that have been deemed successful.
- Use online searchable databases of effective practices.

Assess the validity of the practice by asking the following key questions:

- What process was used to select this practice?
- What criteria were used to measure the success of this practice?
- Was the practice compared against relative objective data with positive results, or did it appear to have been primarily compared against subjective data?
- Was the practice tested in multiple settings for replicability and adaptability?
- Was the practice nominated by one person or organization, or by a number of organizations or individuals?
- Is there enough information included in the description of the practice to enable implementation or adaptation?
- Does the source of the practice appear to be a valid resource for identifying effective practices?
- Is the source transparent in terms of the process and criteria used to select effective practices?

❒ **Task #3: Identify and validate new practices.**

Find potential practices.

- Self-identify effective practices and flag them for follow-up through documentation and validation.

Describe and document the practice by conducting a programmatic or organizational review.

- Identify a review team.
- Create a standardized list of review questions.
- Conduct the review.
- Formally document the findings from the review.
- Analyze the review findings to determine which elements of the practice are context-specific and which are replicable.

- Discuss and review findings.
- Finalize the review and prepare for validation.

Validate the best practice by conducting an assessment:

- Comparative review — this type of review draws primarily on objective data sources external to the organization originating the effective practice.
- Peer review — this type of review draws on the judgment of peers and other practitioner organizations to affirm the practice.

❒ **Task #4: Promote and implement effective practices.**

Promote effective practices with internal staff.

Promote effective practices through the creation of peer-to-peer network and communication systems:

- Online searchable databases of effective practices
- Listservs
- Face-to-face peer learning

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